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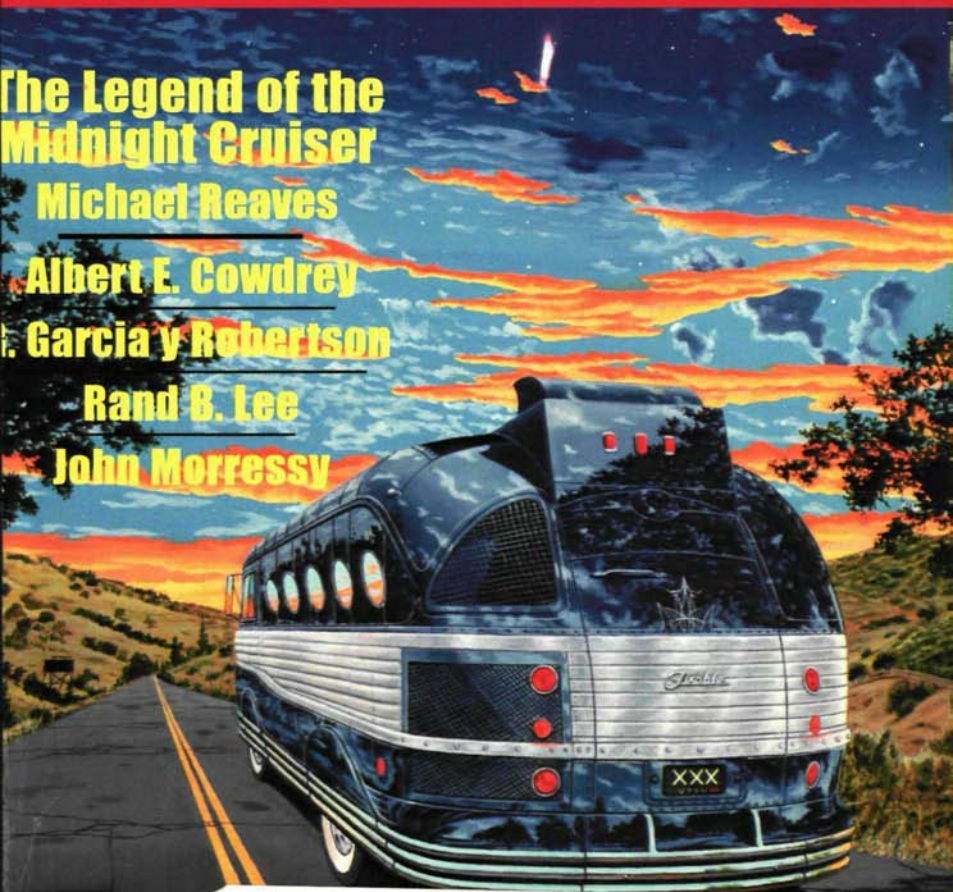

The Legend of the Midnight Cruiser
Michael Reaves

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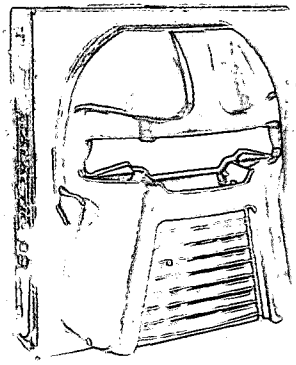

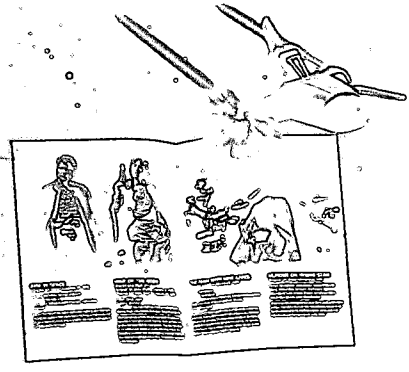

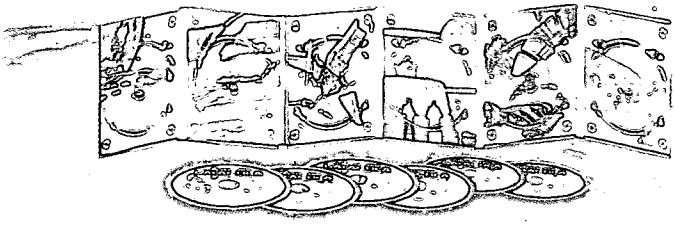

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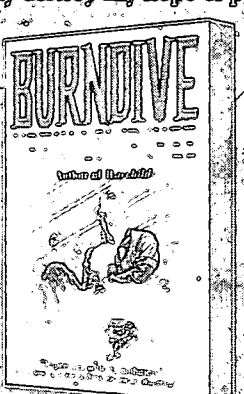

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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 105, No. 6, Whole No. 623, December 2003. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $3.99 per copy. Annual subscription $44.89; $54.89 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Periodical postage paid at Hoboken, NJ 07030, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 2003 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.

Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd. New Milford, NJ 07646.
GENERAL AND EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 3447, HOBOKEN, NJ 07030
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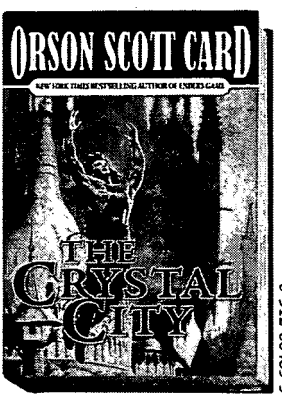

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Twenty years have passed since we last published a story by Mr. Reaves, so a few biographical notes about this author certainly seem to be in order. Michael Reaves began publishing short fiction in the 1970s, with the majority of his short stories appearing here (remember "Werewind"!). His first novel was published in 1978 and sixteen more have seen print since then, including The Shattered World *and* Voodoo Child. *His next novel,* Armageddon Blues, *is due out in 2004. He also has extensive screenwriting credits, including an Emmy award for his work on* Batman: The Animated Series. *His most recent publication is an anthology he and John Pelan coedited,* Shadows Over Baker Street, *which crosses Sherlock Holmes with H. P. Lovecraft's cosmos.*

Mr. Reaves lives in Los Angeles. Born in 1950, he fits in squarely with the Baby Boomers and he observes their nature acutely in this new tale.

The Legend of the Midnight Cruiser

By Michael Reaves

YOU'VE HEARD THE STORIES, I'm sure, if you're into the lifestyle at all. And since you're here, all leveled out and hooked up, I'm going out on a limb and assuming you are. Nice rig, by the way. Now that our generation's getting grayer, people are starting to realize that owning one of these doesn't automatically make you a hardline Republican or a blue-haired Fundamentalist. It's like golf — not just for boring people anymore.

Look at those stars. Beautiful, huh? That's Aldebaran. And Sirius...can't see those in the city. Kids grow up there, never even know the stars exist.

Anyway, most people think the Midnight Cruiser is just another urban legend. A modern-day Flying Dutchman. So did I, at first.

I wish I still did.

Johnny Stillwell, Corinne Hattick, and I all grew up together. All of us born within three years of each other, around 1950. Card-carrying baby boomers. We first met in high school; I think it was at a party, but it's kinda hard to remember because we were all three stoned. We got whacked a lot back then, it being the sixties and all. I think I walked into

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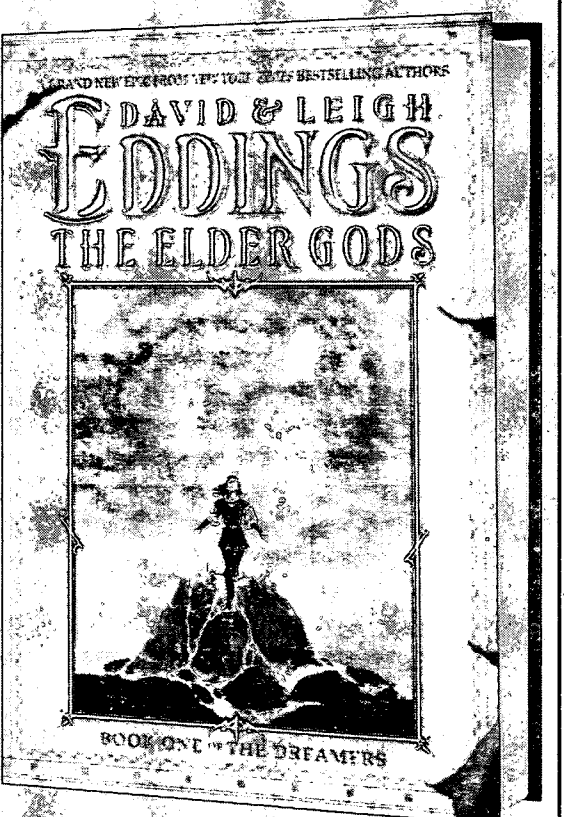

Only the Dreamers hold the power to change the course of history.

ART: MATT STAWICKI

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a bedroom and surprised them on top of a pile of coats, but since I was so blitzed I probably could have fallen and missed the floor, it's hard to be certain. It seems like we had always been friends. And it seems like Johnny and Cor had always been a couple. And it seems that, from the start, I had been in love with Cor.

I know I wasn't the first schmuck in history to fall for his best friend's girl. That didn't make it hurt any less, though. I used to hope it would go away, hoped I'd get used to seeing them together, so free and easy with each other, his arm over her shoulders, hers around his waist...but I never did. I just became resigned to the hurt after a while, like my dad and his arthritis. You don't get numb; you just learn to live with the pain.

It might've been easier if I could've hated Johnny for having her. But I couldn't. I resented it, and felt sorry as hell for myself, but Johnny was just too nice a guy, and too good a friend, to hate. Besides, he was better at just about everything else than I was — classes, track, popularity -- so why shouldn't he be better at love than me?

I know, I know. Sounds like one of those old black-and-white B movies, doesn't it? *Brief Encounter* maybe, or *It Happened One Night.* They were way before your time. But if I was to cast it, I'd say Clark Gable as Johnny, and Cor would be played by Barbara Stanwyck maybe, or Katharine Hepburn. And me — well, I'd like to say Jimmy Stewart, or even Henry Fonda, but to be honest, it'd be more like Ralph Bellamy or Dan Duryea. Look 'em up on the IMDb later, rent one from Blockbuster — you'll see what I mean.

Oh, sure, I had girlfriends. All through high school and college. Half of 'em I don't even remember now, and the ones I do all merge together. There was never anyone special. Meanwhile, Johnny and Cor just kept on trucking. They'd break up every now and then, but never for too long, and I'd always be glad when they got back together again, because they'd both sob on my shoulder until they patched things up, and *that* wasn't too easy to take, believe me.

We all had four years of state university; both Johnny and I majored in draft dodging until the lottery was instituted. That was another way in which he lucked out and I didn't. Don't know if you know this, but during the final years of the Vietnam war, they started drafting boys based on a lottery. Really. Sounds like something out of a Shirley Jackson story, I

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know, but it's the truth — our government was picking birthdays out of a hat, and, depending on the luck of the draw, you got to stay at home and start a family or march off to be cannon fodder. Both Johnny and I'd been born in 1951. His number was 346, which meant his chances of going were about the same as Bill Clinton's.

I was number 11.

Hell no, I didn't go. I was 4-F; the classification everyone wanted, which meant medically unfit for service. Heart valve problem. Had an operation ten years later that took care of it, but at the time it kept me out of the draft. But that's not the point. Johnny never even had to think twice about whether or not he was going — I can't tell you how many sleepless nights *I* spent worrying about it.

It was that way once we got out of school, too. Things came easy to Johnny; he just didn't worry about life. Most of us had these horrible existential crises of identity during those years — who am I, what's my purpose, how'm I gonna make a buck? Johnny never seemed to worry, even though his BA was in Liberal Arts, which, back then, was another way of saying, "I want to spend the rest of my life wearing a paper hat and flipping burgers." He just eased on into a good job, selling real estate, while I pinballed from one thing to another, never seeming to get anywhere. He and Cor got married, bought a house, raised a son. I did none of those things. In a lot of ways I just stayed stuck in the late sixties and early seventies, that stretch of time between the Summer of Love and Nixon's resignation, post-rock and roll but pre-disco. My hair was shorter, but still down to my collar; I quit patching my Levis, but never did graduate to Dockers. And I still know where to score the best grass, but it's way too expensive for me now.

What's past is past, and you're not interested in my life's story. What I wanted to tell you about happened five years ago. Doesn't seem that long.

Maybe it isn't — to them.

Johnny and Cor had always been big on the outdoors. They were healthy, fit, they played tennis and racquetball. And they went backpacking, all over the place. They'd drive fifty miles to some spot way the hell out past nowhere, park and walk another twenty miles before they'd set up a tent and sleep. The next morning they'd come back. It made no sense at all to me. I'd say, "Why not just camp out in your back yard? Think of all the gas and shoe leather you'd save."

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What can I say? I've never been a back-to-nature type — my idea of roughing it is when the maid forgets to leave the mints on the night table at the hotel. And as the two of them got older, I guess they started to feel a bit like that too. Or maybe they just decided it was time to do it in style.

All I know is, one day I get a call from Johnny, telling me I have to come see their new toy.

By now it's 1997, and we're all on the far side of forty, with the big five-oh looming. A serious speed bump on the highway of life for me, but as usual, Johnny just sailed serenely on. He'd taken his money from work and invested it, playing the market as good as he played everything else, and as a result, he was ready to retire. His kid was off in college — they'd had Dusty right after graduating from State U — and he could afford to play now. They weren't rich, you understand — but they were doing well.

Hell, I doubt it ever even occurred to him to *have* a mid-life crisis. Mine, on the other hand, started just after college and I don't think it's over yet. It's been going on so long that, statistically speaking, I'll live to be two hundred.

I drove over to his house, wondering what it would be this time. The last time he'd been this excited it had been the projection TV, with the Fujita line-doubler and the THX home theater sound system. They lived in Royal Oaks, not up on the ridge, but still a few blocks south of the Boulevard, in a nice two-story Colonial. I was real familiar with it. When Dusty was off at college and they'd decide to go to Vegas or someplace, they'd ask me to housesit for them. And I always did. Got to sit in the hot tub, swim in the pool, watch movies on the big screen TV...and pretend, for just a little while, that it was me instead of him.

I saw it as soon as I turned onto their street. It wasn't hard to miss.

They'd bought a motorhome.

I wasn't really that surprised. After all, that's the kind of thing the upper middle class does, heading on into the golden years. Not that they were anywhere near senior citizen material yet — Johnny still weighed about what he weighed in college, most of it muscle, and Cor — her hair was more ashes and less fire now, but she still had a figure that made my heart go pitty-pat. I, on the other hand, had put on twenty pounds, all around my middle-aged middle.

Anyway, there it was: a thirty-five-foot Kenneka Road Trekker

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Supreme, brand new, judging by the paper license plate in the rear window, backed into their driveway and aimed at the great outdoors like a giant fun-seeking missile. I didn't know a lot about motorhomes then — my education has progressed quite a bit since — but even then I could tell this wasn't any milk carton on wheels. Kenneka makes a lot of the celebrity wagons Hollywood uses when the stars have to live on location, and even the most A-list of them would've been happy with this.

Johnny was inside it; he came out when I pulled up. He looked as happy as I had been when my mom bought me a new Red Ryder wagon.

"What do you think?" he asked me.

"It's big," I said. There wasn't a lot else to say at that point.

"Let me show it to you," and he grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the door.

It was damned impressive, even to an old hippie who still gave lip service to the environment. White on the outside, two-tone gray inside; a Class A diesel pusher with dual 6V Coach batteries, ducted AC and heat, 100-gallon gas tank, LP and water, a 4KV generator and a full monocoque chassis. Johnny rattled off these and a whole lot of other statistics while he gave me the tour, and I smiled and nodded, not knowing what any of them meant. Not then.

The interior was a marvel of compact engineering and ergonometry. It had oak finished cabinetry, pleated shades and mini-blinds, a closed-off bedroom and slide-out dining area, a full-sized tub and shower and a chemical toilet. The ceiling was studded with recessed lighting, stereo speakers and LP, CO and smoke detectors. It seemed far bigger on the inside than it looked from the outside; it reminded me of one of those old cartoons where Daffy or Mickey or some other critter would push a button on a car, and it would magically unfold into a palatial estate on wheels.

"You got yourself a TARDIS," I told him. He laughed. *Dr. Who* had been one of our favorites back in college, especially when viewed through a haze of Jamaican Red.

The living space opened into a cab with captain's chairs and a dashboard that was straight out of *Star Trek*, studded with digital gauges, GPS, security camera monitor screens and a wideband radio. The chairs could turn 180° and from them you could watch the thirty-six-inch projection TV on a screen that lowered in front of the galley. It had a

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satellite dish and a CD player with 150kw of surround sound. It had a VCR. It had a motion detector alarm system. It had a combination microwave/convection oven. It had —

"Enough," I said, verging on overload. I sat down in one of the captain's chairs. It was comfortable enough that you could drive from here to Tierra del Fuego and back without needing a break. Johnny stood next to the fridge and grinned at me.

"We finally took your advice," he said. "No more backpacking. From now on we travel in style."

By "we" I assumed he meant he and Cor, naturally. I tried to look on the bright side: this meant that I'd probably be housesitting more for them, which meant less time spent in my shoebox apartment listening to the heavy metal Muzak of the pistonheads next door. That was a definite positive. "Congratulations," I said, and I meant it. "Just promise me that if you get an uncontrollable urge to wear polyester, you'll seek professional help. And don't worry about your place; I'll watch it as much as you need. What are friends for?"

Johnny gave me that look of his he always reserved for my especially lame statements. "We want you to come *with* us, Drake. Some of the time, anyway."

That one I didn't see coming, and I just stared at him. He looked mightily pleased with himself.

"It's not the biggest reason we bought this, of course," he said. "But it was a factor. Cor's idea, actually. You can sleep in the overhead, and we've got the bedroom. Totally private, man. It'll be fun."

Remember that *Far Side* cartoon about what dogs hear when we talk to them? That was me right then. Out of everything he'd just said, all I heard was one word: *Cor.*

Her idea? No way. She'd never given any sign at all in over thirty years that she considered me anything but a friend, that she had any inkling of how I really felt....

And she hasn't now, I told myself firmly. *Rein it in, Romeo.* There was no reason at all to read anything into this other than what Johnny'd just said — it would be fun. After all, we'd gone to dinners, movies, ball games, together; I'd even gone camping with them, reluctantly, once or twice. This was just a logical extension of those outings, in their eyes. Fun.

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Which we generally had, don't get me wrong. It's not like I was always in despair over the love that would never be mine, etc. Usually it *was* fun, and Cor and I were just what we were supposed to be — friends. Usually.

But this, I knew, was different. This was somehow more — intimate.

But what was I afraid of, after all? I didn't think for a silver second that we might all wind up in bed together; I most emphatically didn't want that, and neither did they, I was sure. And Johnny was right: given the size and construction of this beast, the two of them could be going at it like sex-starved wolverines and I wouldn't hear a thing. Their bed and mine were practically in separate zip codes.

Also, I had to admit that the idea of spending a few days in this ingenious little habitat on wheels was intriguing. About the only way you could get me to leave civilization for the wild would be to drag a piece of civilization along — which is just what they were proposing.

And then, while I was bouncing between yes and no, I heard:

"Say you will, Drake. It'll be just like watching *Wild Kingdom*. You won't get a single mosquito bite. Promise."

I turned and saw Cor standing in the doorwell, arms folded, smiling at me. A smile that would make me gladly hike through the swamps of Mordor if she asked.

"And besides," she added, "if you don't like it, we'll just leave you by the side of the road."

Who could refuse an offer like that?

"Just one question," I said. "Does it have a hot tub?"

I DIDN'T GO with them every time they went out — not even, as it turned out, most times. But enough. Enough to get some knowledge of the fascinating intricacies of the mobile world. From the full-time RV-ers who literally live on the road to those like Johnny and Cor, who were just dipping their toes in it, this was an entire subculture, with its own magazines, websites, chat boards, and more. I also learned by osmosis the care and feeding of the beast: How to set the wheel chocks, how to adjust the air leveling stabilizers to insure you're parked flat, how to hook up water, electricity, and sewage in a campground, how to fill the propane tank, drain the black water, work the slideout and the awnings, manage

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the security and GPS systems. Even how to drive it, which was surprisingly easy once I got used to its humongous size. You get a real sense of superiority being able to see over ninety percent of the cars and trucks ahead of you.

And there is nothing quite like parking on a bluff above a pastoral valley, watching the sunset while eating fresh-caught pan-fried trout and drinking Chardonnay, with Häagen-Dazs for dessert.

As for the group dynamics: well, I did feel about as useful as a burst appendix most of the time, but it wasn't any more painful to see them together in this setting than in any other. Like I said, after a while you get resigned to the pain.

And that's never a good idea. Because, just as nature abhors a vacuum, pain hates to be taken for granted.

It was about nine o'clock one night, after another weekend of genteel roughing it, that we first encountered the cruiser.

I was driving; Cor was riding shotgun. Johnny was in the back asleep, tuckered out after a hard day of playing Mark Trail. We'd been boondocking it for the last few days, eschewing KOAs and other campgrounds in favor of the back roads, dry camping wherever we found a level space. Now we were heading home, along a winding two-lane road that meandered through low hills and stands of trees. I was taking it slow, maybe forty-five, down to twenty on the curves. The Moon was peeking over the horizon, the stars were almost bright enough to read by, and we were the only people on the road — the only ones in the world, it felt like.

I don't remember what Cor and I were talking about. Something trivial, like music, or maybe movies. Something safe, just so that I could listen to her voice and look at her face. Then, after a moment of moonlit silence, she said, "Johnny and I may be splitting up."

Even counting the adrenalyzed reaction I would have to the nightmare just under five minutes in our future, I think right then was when I came closest to driving the wagon off the road. Her statement completely blindsided me. After a moment, when I could breathe again, I said, "*What?*"

She sighed, looking sad and completely unaware of the megatonnage she'd just dropped on me. "With Dusty off at school, it's — we're different.

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And he's not happy. He keeps saying he wants something, but he doesn't know what it is."

I was astonished. I had thought that Johnny had somehow managed to escape the angst that lay in wait for all males over forty, the "Is that all there is?" feeling, the panic that rises when you realize that you may have just passed the last off ramp to anything meaningful in your life. But maybe he hadn't. Maybe he'd just managed to put his off a little longer than most of us.

"Is that why he wanted this?" I asked, gesturing to encompass the Trekker.

"I guess. Some men buy motorcycles or sports cars...Johnny bought a motorhome. It hasn't helped," she continued, speaking softly, even though he was asleep over twenty feet away behind a fanfold door. "He's been such a pain in the ass I can't tell you, this past year. And these days he can't even...." she arched her eyebrows meaningfully.

"Whoa," I said, "This is verging on overshare. I mean, I'm sorry to hear this, Cor, but I...uh...." I stalled, because she was looking at me with such sadness. As if she wanted me to fix it, somehow, and I couldn't, of course.

And did I really want to? That was the inevitable next thought. If they did break up, did that mean that the rules had all changed?

I felt like pond scum for thinking these thoughts. But I thought them. Then I went back and thought them again. The second time it wasn't as hard, and that made me feel even worse.

I looked at Cor, not sure what I was going to say. But whatever it was, it went unsaid. Because she suddenly looked out the windshield and yelled, "*Look out!*"

I looked out. And slammed on the brakes.

While we'd been talking we had come out of the hills and onto a long, relatively straight stretch of blacktop. Unconsciously, I had speeded up to about fifty, because there was nobody ahead of us. I'll repeat that: it was lonesome highway all the way from the front bumper to the swollen Moon that had just risen above the horizon. I couldn't have missed seeing a toy car on the road, let alone a real one.

And yet, right in front of us, so close that I could see the reflection of our cab in the chrome on the rear bumper, was another motorhome,

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trundling along at about half our speed. I'd very nearly driven right up its tailpipe. Our tires squealed, and the speedometer readout dropped in a blur of numbers.

I felt the shoulder strap dig in painfully across my chest, and I knew Cor had also. "You okay?"

"Yeah. You?" Her voice was shaky.

"I'm fine. Where the hell did *he* come from?" I was pissed off — at this fool who'd showed up out of nowhere and nearly gotten us killed, at Cor and Johnny for rocking the secure, if not happy, world I lived in, and at myself, for wanting my best friend to get divorced so that I could try to move in on his wife.

The RV ahead of us was big, as large as the Road Trekker, if not larger. It was black with aluminum detailing, very sleek and streamlined, to judge from the back, which was all we could really see. It was moseying along at around thirty, in no hurry at all. It couldn't possibly have passed me, and there weren't any side roads that I had seen. So how did it get in front of me?

The fear hit me then. I took a deep breath, noticing that my throat made a slight whining sound as I exhaled. My hands were gripping the steering wheel very tightly. I had no idea where this sudden panic attack was coming from; I just knew that something was wrong here, something more than just that rig's impossible appearance in front of us. Something *felt* wrong. The air, which had been cool just a minute ago, now seemed suddenly warm and humid, like a hothouse, and there was a strange, thick texture, almost a smell but not quite, to it that —

"What's wrong?" Johnny asked, and I nearly drove off the road again. He was standing behind us, still wearing the safari pants and pullover he'd had on earlier today.

"Great jumping Jesus!" I said, and my voice was higher than it had been since I was ten. "I thought you were asleep."

"I was. Until you hit the brakes and I hit the wall." He peered ahead. "What's up with this guy?"

"He just....". I faltered, and Johnny looked at me with a slight frown, and I knew there was no way I could let myself fall apart now. "I don't know. He came out of nowhere." As I said it, I glanced at the speedometer and saw that he'd slowed down to just over twenty, as had I.

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"Christ, Drake, you drive like an old man wearing a hat," Johnny said. "Go on and pass him."

I hesitated, but not out of any conscious decision. My muscles simply locked. I tried to push my shoe against the pedal, but the message wasn't getting through. I couldn't say why then — can't really say why now — but I knew, somehow, that it just wasn't a good idea.

"What are you waiting for?" Johnny seemed edgy, but not panicked like I was. "There's no one coming. Pull out and go around the sonuvabitch."

Not a good idea. The warning was coming from a real deep part of my brain, the cold and sleepy reptilian core that we've coated over with layer after layer of reason and logic for millennia. That part doesn't speak up too often, but when it does, you don't want to ignore it.

But fear of contempt, even unvoiced, from someone we admire can overcome almost any other concern, no matter how deep its roots go. I set my teeth to keep them from chattering and started turning the wheel slightly toward the left. It was like trying to steer a supertanker.

And then Cor said, in an oddly flat voice, "Look at the license plate."

I looked. Johnny looked. We were close enough that the headlamps illuminated it clear as day. It was green, with the plate number in white. Underneath the number it read UTAH 67.

"That's an old license plate," I said. I think I said it. It sounded like someone else speaking.

"Doesn't look old," Cor said. "Looks new. Brand new. So does the paint job."

"You know what?" Johnny sounded almost excited. Whatever the nameless unease affecting Cor and me was, it wasn't playing at all on his screen. "That's a Motorstar Dynacruiser! I recognize the style. They stopped making them in 1972, I think. Someone's done a great job of restoring it." He nudged me in the shoulder. "Go on, Drake — pass it so we can take a look."

I remembered hearing some other RV enthusiast mention the Dynacruiser once. There were only a thousand or so made before the company went bankrupt. He'd described it as "A Buck Rogers spaceship on wheels."

The sour taste of panic was beginning to fade now. Johnny's explanation made sense, after all. This was an antique that someone had found,

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fixed up, and was now touring America in; nothing more than that. I glanced at Cor, saw she was thinking the same thing. No doubt he'd been ahead of us all along, and I'd somehow missed seeing him until I was right on top of him. That particular affliction of the human male that women call "refrigerator blindness" — the inability to see something right in front of you.

My chest relaxed enough for me to take a deep breath, and boy, did it feel good. "Okay," I said. And swung out into the left lane to pass the Dynacruiser.

I accelerated to fifty mph, and the Trekker began moving past it. I could still see the road ahead, and it was empty for at least a mile, which gave me plenty of room to pass, even if another car appeared on the horizon right then.

As we drew up alongside the Dynacruiser, I spared a couple of quick glances at it. It had a sleek, almost Deco look that did made me think of old Flash Gordon serials. It was as aerodynamic as a bullet, and I wondered what the interior looked like. It had windows: oval in shape, like futuristic portholes, and made of thick glass that had been smoked almost black. I couldn't see anything within, at first; then I got the vague impression of movement in there, shadowy shapes flickering. At one point the palm of a hand, fingers spread, slapped against the window for a brief instant. It was gone almost before I realized what it was.

We were now even with the Dynacruiser, and I could see the cab. Its windows were just as opaque as the others. I got only the vaguest impression of a silhouette behind the wheel. But something about it was enough to bring all the terror of a few moments ago slamming back into me; I actually grunted from the impact.

I'm not sure I can tell you what was wrong with it. It looked *incomplete*, somehow.

"What are you waiting for?" Johnny said. "Get past him and back in your own lane."

I fed the engine some more diesel. We didn't seem to be going faster; in fact, if anything, we were slowing down. I looked at the readout. According to it, we were past fifty-five, but every sense I had was telling me we were decelerating. The sounds of the engine, the tires against the road, the wind whistling past us, all were *subdued*, as if they were coming

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through a thick wall. I looked at Cor, and I could see she was feeling the same thing. It was that helpless sensation you have when mired in a nightmare, when you try to run but your feet are stuck, you're trying to push through some kind of clear gel that drags you down. And you never get any closer to your goal, but you know all the time that *something* is getting closer and closer to *you*.

Both the Trekker and the Dynacruiser seemed to be barely creeping now. The landscape still blurred past, but it blurred in slow motion, if that makes any sense. And it was getting increasingly hard to see; some kind of fog or ground mist had gathered, even though the night sky had been perfectly clear a few minutes ago. Gray fog thickened and streamed around both our rigs, its ragged tendrils somehow filmy — they stuck momentarily to the windshield before trailing by, leaving slimy, silvery streaks like snail tracks.

Visibility had gone from ten miles to less than ten feet. The fog threw back the headlights' beams, and the reflected light was — *dirty*. I don't know how else to describe it.

I knew I had to do something. Even though every nerve in my body was telling me we were crawling down that highway, the speedometer was now telling me sixty mph. There could be an eighteen wheeler thundering toward us through the fog right now, and we wouldn't know it until just before it smashed us flatter than a steamrollered cat.

I looked across the cab again. Cor was watching me, her face very white and scared. Johnny was saying something, but I couldn't hear him. All I could hear, bizarrely, was snatches of an old rock song in my head: the Stones singing "Midnight Rambler."

I looked out the window at the Dynacruiser. That silhouette was still there in the cab, behind the smoked glass, and the sight of it still made my guts feel packed in ice. But it was changing somehow, growing less reflective. Then I realized what was happening.

The driver was rolling his window down. In another second it would be lowered completely, and then he could lean out into the dead moonlight and look at me.

My memory of what happened next is pretty chaotic. I do, however, remember yanking the wheel hard to the right, sending the Trekker on a collision course with the Dynacruiser. I remember Cor's horrified scream,

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and Johnny trying, too late, to grab the wheel. And I remember the flood of relief I felt knowing that we would hit before I could see the driver's face.

The next thing I knew, the Trekker was on the right shoulder, half off the road and facing in a forty-five degree angle back the way we had come. The Moon was halfway to zenith, and the sky was full of stars. There was not a wisp of fog.

And there was no sign of the Dynacruiser — or any other vehicle — anywhere to be seen.

JUST AFTER DAWN we stopped at a gas station that advertised diesel. There was a store there — not a mini-mart, but a small mom-and-pop place, built from planked wood and looking like it had been on this planet since before my folks had been born. The pumps were the old-fashioned kind, with a hand-crank to reset the cost, and there was someone who actually put the nozzle in the tank for you, squeegeed your windshield, and even asked how life was treating you.

None of us felt like telling him right then.

I went inside to buy something — I didn't care what it was, I just needed to spend a little money. It seemed like it would help. If I did enough normal, everyday things, maybe eventually it might seem like a normal, everyday world again. I wasn't very optimistic, but it was worth a try.

The old man behind the counter — skinny, gray beard, John Deere cap — took my money for the small bottle of orange juice, gave me change, then looked at my face and said, "You don't look too good, mister."

I mumbled something about low blood sugar as I uncapped the orange juice.

He said, "You look like you just saw the Midnight Cruiser."

By the time he'd fetched a mop and helped me clean up the juice and the broken glass, Johnny and Cor had come in to see what was taking me so long. Then the four of us — Johnny, Cor, me and the old man — sat outside on a bench, drinking sodas — or in my case, a beer — that he provided for free and watching the mist burn off the treetops as the Sun rose and he told us the story. His son, the pump-jockey, kept busy with chores. I had the feeling he'd heard the tale a few times before.

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There aren't many urban legends specific to RV-ers; the one that most people are familiar with is the story about the fellow who set the Cruise Control and then, thinking it meant "Automatic Pilot," left the wheel with his rig going down the highway at sixty mph and totalled it. That one actually happened, though most folks think it's a fable. Just like most folks think the story of the Midnight Cruiser isn't anything more than a modern campfire tale.

Except for the ones who've seen it.

Happened back in the early seventies, the store owner told us, about a hundred and fifty miles from there, near the Indian rez. Someone had been boondocking on sacred ground, so the story went, and as a result had been damned to forever roam the highways. That was one version, anyway. Other tellings had the Dynacruiser's owner trying to renege on a pact with Satan, or being cursed by a corporate coven for inventing an engine that got one hundred miles to the gallon. One particularly bizarre account was given about him being a marijuana-crazed Rastafarian dope dealer who was into some kind of voodoo black magic that backfired. The Midnight Cruiser, it seemed, had more origin stories than a truckload of comic books. But where he came from didn't matter as much as what he did. All the stories were consistent on this part: He collected people. Why he did it, what his criteria for selection were, was never clear. But apparently there were few indeed who saw the Midnight Cruiser and escaped to tell the tale.

Like we had.

I remembered the shapes I'd seen moving in the deep darkness behind those windows, the pale hand splayed for an instant against the glass. I had another beer. It didn't help.

There was no way we could make it back to the city before nightfall, not even if we broke every speed law in the book. We decided that the best plan was to drive until sundown, then find a KOA or a truckstop or some other well-populated overnight and hole up there. We could reach home the following day easily.

We didn't talk too much about what had happened. After learning about the legend, there was sort of an unvoiced mutual decision to stay away from the topic. At least, that's the way it was between Cor and me. Johnny tried to approach it once or twice, mostly to rationalize it

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somehow, to find an explanation that fit the world as he knew it. But the look on Cor's face stopped that pretty quick.

That night we stayed in a state roadside rest area with three other mobiles, who were probably fairly nonplussed at the way we fortified ourselves. We kept all the outside lights burning, the alarm and security cameras operating, the whole rig sealed up like a bunker. Even so, none of us even tried to sleep that night. We stayed up and watched movies. Comedies. No one laughed, but at least we all got through the night sane.

We made it back to town with no further trouble. The first week I stayed in their guest room, before I could handle being by myself. For the next three months, I slept with every light in my place on. When I was able to sleep at all.

Cor only spoke to me about that night, or about how things were between her and Johnny, one more time, just before they took that last ride. I could see, though, that their marriage was disintegrating fast. I told them both that if they needed to talk, I was there. Neither one called me.

They sold the Trekker, of course, immediately. Johnny got less than half the book value of it, just to get it out of the driveway.

It was nearly a month after the trip when I called and got Cor on the line. My previous calls had just landed in voice mail and not been returned. But this time she picked up when she heard my voice.

She didn't seem particularly surprised that it was me. I asked her how she was, and she said "Fine," which was probably the biggest lie anyone's told since Judas Iscariot, but I hadn't really expected more. Then I asked her how things were between Johnny and her.

"We have separate bedrooms," she said, and her voice was very weary. "Separate bank accounts, now." She sighed. "Separate lives." There was a moment of silence, then she said, "He — he talks about it. More and more. I've told him I don't want to hear it, but...."

"Talks about it how?" I asked, when she didn't continue.

"To him, it was...something else...than it was to you and me. I think that, to him, it was...the last big thing. Do you understand?"

I said I thought I did.

"I think he's going to do something," she said.

Something in her tone chilled me down to my ankles. "I think you should get out of there, Cor," I told her. "You could — stay here for a while. I think maybe you shouldn't be around Johnny these days."

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She was quiet for so long that I thought we'd lost the connection. Then she said, very softly, "I'm sorry, Drake." And hung up.

I didn't go over there. I should have. I wish to God I had. I should have jumped in the car and gone and taken her out of there. I didn't.

The next morning they were gone.

The neighbors couldn't tell me much. It seems that all that night the street was blanketed in a thick fog, which is almost unheard-of this time of year. The couple next door said they heard an engine idling for a short time after midnight, and mentioned that the air smelled like bus exhaust. There was no sign of a struggle, no evidence of foul play. They had just — left.

Eventually their son put the house up for sale. And that's all I know.

You want to know why I'm here? Why I'm on the road after dark, in this dinky little cab-over camper, knowing what I know is out there?

I'll tell you. I think I know who the Midnight Cruiser is. Or *what* he is. I don't think he's a sorcerer, or that he's on the Devil's shit list, or anything like that. I think he is — was — a guy. Just a normal guy, who worked his whole life, who did everything right, who chased after the American Dream until he caught it. Or thought he did. I think he bought that Dynacruiser and he — and the missus, too, maybe — hit the road, traveled the blue highways, because that's what you *do*. That's one way you deal with that terror that grips you at all hours, that fear that your life is running dry.

Remember the legend of the Flying Dutchman? A Dutch merchant ship was sailing around the Cape of Good Hope, ran into a storm, was driven onto the rocks, and started to sink. The Captain swore that he would make it around the Cape if it took him until Doomsday. So that's what he was condemned to do: spend eternity trying to round the Cape. God takes these things very literally sometimes.

I think the Cruiser made the same mistake. I think he wanted that dream so badly he was willing to spend eternity looking for it. I think Johnny was the same way. I think that wagon is full of people chasing a dream that never was. And now Johnny's one of them.

But why Cor went with him — that I don't know. Maybe someday I'll find out.

Or maybe this is just my dream to chase.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Green Angel, by Alice Hoffman, Scholastic Press, 2003, $16.95.

WE ALL know better than to judge a book by its cover, but most of us do it anyway, especially when we're browsing the bookstore and not really sure what we're looking for. That's when the attractive book cover has the advantage over its less-lucky cousins.

Green Angel is one of those lucky books, though to be honest, it being a Hoffman title, I would have picked it up anyway. Nevertheless, as a package, this small book aimed for the YA market is one of the loveliest presentations I've come across in years. The front sports a young woman in a red, sleeveless top and green skirt who appears to be growing out of the ground. She's reading a book from which crows are flying. The back has another young woman, this one wearing boots with nails protruding from them, stockings over tattooed legs, a plaid miniskirt, a black leather jacket, a tattoo of bat's wings at the nape of her neck, short cropped hair.

The front is ethereal, but still earthy. The woman is facing us, though her attention is on the book. On the back, her punky counterpart has her back to us. The one welcomes, the second creates distance.

The art is by Matt Murhain and continues inside with a handful of very simple chapter headings. The design of the interior — simple, graceful, welcoming, with a wonderful quirky copyright page — is by Elizabeth B. Parisi.

I've gone on at length about the looks of *Green Angel* simply because I find it rare these days for a book to look so good, with obvious loving attention paid to every aspect, right down to the typeface. And happily, the story itself lives up to every pledge the look of the book promises.

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It's the story of fifteen-year-old Green, who lives in a rural area with her family outside of a large city. Life is wonderful until her parents and sister go into the city on the same day that a disaster strikes, killing everyone in the city at the time and filling the sky with ashes. The ashy skies last for months and looters soon appear on the scene. Green falls into despair and changes from the young woman on the front cover of the book to the one on the back, both in looks and temperament.

This is a book about grief and dealing with loss, but it's also a book about hope and growth and change. The setting and story are both utterly modern and anywhere timeless. The language is poetic, but still down-to-earth — gorgeous, really. *Green Angel* is one of those rare cases in which there is not one word too many or too few. I was so enamored with the book that when I got to the end, I immediately turned back to the first page and began to read it again.

Am I offering too many superlatives? Perhaps. Art and story, and how they're delivered, are completely subjective, so it's difficult to say. I just know that if I didn't already love Hoffman's work, this book would do the trick. As it was, I fell in love with her storytelling gifts all over again.

And if I haven't already convinced you to give the book a try, perhaps I can appeal to those of you with a charitable soul. Hoffman donated her advance for the book, and will be donating a portion of the royalties, to The Green Angel Grant at The New York Women's Foundation, which is dedicated to bringing economic security to the low-income women and girls of New York City after 9/11. For more information, go to: *http://www.nywf.org/green=angel.html.*

So if you do pick-up a copy, not only do you get a beautiful book, but you'll also be contributing to a worthy cause.

The Boats of the "Glen Carrig" and Other Nautical Adventures, by William Hope Hodgson, Night Shade Books, 2003, $35.

The good news isn't simply that Hodgson's classic *The Boats of the "Glen Carrig"* is available in this handsome volume, collected with all of Hodgson's nautical series stories, some of which haven't been available since 1918. No, the good news is that this is only the first of a projected five-volume series collecting all of Hodgson's fiction in

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matching volumes. Upcoming inclusions will be other Hodgson treasures such as *The House on the Borderland* and *The Night Land* — two novels which, surely, rank near the top of any list of the best weird fiction.

But for now we have the book in hand, a hefty volume, edited by Jeremy Lassen, with old-fashioned pen & ink chapter headings by Jason Van Hollander. The stories are somewhat old-fashioned too, weird and creepy, or rousing sea adventures, told in a narrative voice that echoes the age of the author's origin, Victorian England. The ship backgrounds are authentic (Hodgson spent eight years as a seaman, sailing three times around the world about the turn of the century) and the spell he created with his dark stories went on to inspire such luminaries as H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith, and probably Jack Vance as well, when you compare *The Night Land*, set at the end of the world in the light of a dying red sun with Vance's own *The Dying Earth*.

Hodgson died in WWI, a young forty-three. He'd only been writing for eleven years, and after his death, his work soon faded into obscurity.

Editor Lassen strikes me as our generation's H. C. Koenig (a young American fantasy fan who, in the thirties, began a single-handed and successful campaign to get Hodgson's work back in print). For if the subsequent volumes are as good as this first offering, Lassen will have done the fantasy field as enormous a service now, reintroducing readers to Hodgson's wonderful fiction, as Koenig did in his own time when he persuaded August Derleth at Arkham House to publish the seminal collection *The House on the Borderland and Other Novels*, the book that finally brought Hodgson the popularity his work deserved, thirty years after his death.

This new series from Night Shade Books is an excellent place to find out what the fuss was all about.

The Wolves in the Walls, by Neil Gaiman & Dave McKean, HarperCollins, 2003, $16.99.

I'd been looking forward to this book ever since I first heard Gaiman talk about it on a panel at the 2002 World Fantasy Convention. Gaiman, it turns out, is one of those rare writers who can make a work-in-progress sound really fascinating. Usually, listening to that sort of thing makes for more tedium than I care to experience (don't tell

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me about the book, write it and let me read it on my own!), but Gaiman's brief description of a plucky young girl who realizes that wolves live inside the walls of her parents' house, and who then goes on to drive the family out so that they have to live at the bottom of the garden, promised to deliver a welcome helping of dark whimsy.

I was disappointed, however, when a galley arrived in my P.O. Box and I realized that *The Wolves in the Walls* wasn't so much like *Coraline* (a short novel with illustrations) as *The Day I Swapped My Dad For Two Goldfish* (a children's picture book). But the disappointment only lasted as long as it took me to get to the third page where Lucy first hears noises in the walls.

What follows is another splendid foray into the dark and strange mind of Gaiman, who, if nothing else, never delivers a story that takes you where you think it will. The prose here is very simple. There's no age given — probably because the publisher knows that adults will pick up a Gaiman book for themselves as readily as they buy one for their children — but I'd guess it's in the neighborhood of five and up. You might want to vet the story and pictures for possible nightmare inducing, though kids are far more resilient than we adults think they are.

McKean's art won't necessarily be to everyone's taste — it's a bit confrontational, rather than typical picture book pretty — but I love the look of it, and I'm sure children will, too.

I know from the mail and comments I get on this column that a lot of its readers, both young and older, enjoy Francesca Lia Block's books. With that in mind, I'd like to quickly recommend a few titles that you might want to try while waiting for Block's next book to come out: *Gingerbread* by Rachel Cohn (Simon & Schuster), *Empress of the World* by Sara Ryan (Speak/Penguin), and *Why Girls Are Weird* by Pamela Ribon (Downtown Press).

All three are mainstream titles, but they have wonderful characters with individual voices, and their stories and world-views are as quirky in their own way as those of any of Block's characters.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

Martian Quest: The Early Brackett, by Leigh Brackett, Haffner Books, 2002, $40.

AMONG younger readers, Leigh Brackett is likely known, if known at all, as author of the second *Star Wars* script and dedicatee of the movie. But beginning in 1940 and continuing well into the seventies, she published a stream of stories and novels that remain of near-legendary stature among science fiction readers and served as a profound influence on subsequent fantasy and science writers.

Though it was fantastic literature that remained her primary interest, her influence extended far beyond.

1944: Howard Hawks has just hired William Faulkner to write the screenplay for Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*. Thinking about who to bring on as collaborator, Hawks remembers reading an outstanding hardboiled novel titled *No Good from a Corpse* and tells his assistant to "Get me that Brackett guy." Surprised when an attractive young woman shows up, he hires her anyway. She works again with Hawks in *1959*, creating with Jules Furthman one of the great classic Westerns, *Rio Lobo*. In 1967 she's summoned again by Hawks to collaborate on *El Dorado*.

1973: She writes *The Long Goodbye* for Robert Altman, a reinvention of Chandler's landmark novel, with Eliott Gould as Marlowe.

1980: Months before she dies in 1978 at the age of 62, she turns in the draft of the screenplay for *The Empire Strikes Back*, for which, posthumously, she receives a Hugo.

Other mystery and hardboiled novels would follow *No Good from a Corpse—An Eye for an Eye* (1957), *The Tiger Among Us* (1957) and *Silent Partner* (1969) — as would other work in film and scripts for TV shows such as *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*, a Western novel, *Follow the Free Wind*, and thirteen

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science fiction or fantasy novels.

Brackett's first sale, "Martian Quest," was to John Campbell at *Astounding*. That story and nineteen others published over the next three years in such pulps as *Planet Stories*, *Startling Stories*, *Amazing Stories* and *Super Science Stories*, 478 pages of them, are collected in *Martian Quest: The Early Brackett* from Haffner Press.

As with many true originals, much of Brackett's work, for all its seeming diversity — hardboiled, standard mystery, Westerns, high fantasy, science fiction — falls in a remarkably straight line. Here in *Martian Quest* are adumbrated the themes and preoccupations she'll fulfill in later work: the creation of an entire world in précis, details forthcoming. Here, too, is clear demonstration of the power, the narrative inertia that once set in motion cannot be stopped, and the genius for description that will forever be her hallmarks and heritage.

Leigh Brackett's Mars, for instance, this too-real toad in its imaginary garden: red desert stretching to ranges of barren hills and red dust rolling like water, actual water carted in on tanker ships from wetter worlds, humus and phosphates and nitrates also shipped in from offworld to make farming possible, a world of desert tribesmen, lost secrets, and a rich, unknown history.

Or Leigh Brackett's Venus of blazing heat, unreclaimable swampland and treacherous monsoons.

> It was night, the deep indigo night of Venus. Beyond the open hut door, Campbell could see the *liha*-trees swaying a little in the hot, slow breeze. It seemed as though the whole night swayed, like a dark blue veil.
>
> For a long time he didn't hear anything but the far-off screaming of some swamp beast on the kill. Then, sharp and cruel against the blue silence, a drum began to beat. ["The Citadel of Lost Ships"]

Brackett's Mercury, in the earliest stages of being colonized as a refuge for destitute, desperate veterans of the Second Interplanetary War, is the harshest and most inhospitable of these landscapes. Yet *all* Brackett's settings are frontiers: difficult places to live, ever hostile, ever perilous. Witness the forts of "The Dragon-Queen of Venus" (complete with Texan) and "The Stellar Legion," or the very title of "No Man's Land in Space."

Her characters, too, are the people who make up a frontier: out-

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casts, renegades, petty criminals and rebels, men with too much past and too little future.

> He disembarked at Thern, heart of the Rikatva Area, a pale, stooped shadow of a man, young from his face, but old and hopeless from his eyes. With him nearly five hundred other passengers on the ancient spacetub climbed down into the dry red earth that was their last hope of economic freedom. ["Martian Quest"]

> And on a moon-washed Martian night, Jaffa Gray stood in the shadow of the Valkis slave-market and cursed, bitterly and softly; a stocky, strong-boned man, his square face hard with the failure that he had at last to admit. ["Water Pirate"]

Fantasies such as Brackett's with their full-blooded romanticism, Mike Moorcock writes in the introduction here, passed from grace with World War II. Newer writers of popular fiction, folks like Graham Greene and Raymond Chandler, shared "a sense of yearning loss, as of innocence, a nobler, irredeemable past and an uncertain future." Brackett's characters are often aware, Moorcock writes, of some moral transgression for which everyone forgives them except themselves. Our sense of progress toward real civilization had been blasted to bits before our eyes. We were all guilty. We had become, again, barbarians of a sort.

A favorite and recurring theme, Ed Hamilton wrote in his introduction to *The Best of Leigh Brackett*, is that of a strong man's quest after a grand dream, and his failure as it turns to smoke and ash in his hands.

Moorcock in turn points out that Brackett's loners are avatars of the original American hero, all those cowboys, frontiersmen, and half-outlaws who bespeckle our popular mythology. It was Ed Hamilton, he says, who first described such books as *The Continental Op* not as detective stories but as urban adventure stories. Finally Brackett took as much from James M. Cain as from Burroughs, Moorcock insists,

> bringing the spare, laconic prose and psychically wounded heroes of Hemingway, Hammett and Chandler into the sf pulp, rather as Max Brand (especially as Evan Evans) had brought it to the Western. It was why she could move so easily between private eyes

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with a nasty past, star-weary spacers and moody cactus-cussers.

It's not far, after all, from the beginning of "Child of the Sun" with Black Guard ships in pursuit of a fleeing Unregenerate, or from "Retreat to the Stars" and its band of rebels, to *Star Wars* or any of a hundred genre novels on today's shelves. Or to a posse on the trail of some falsely accused, honorable man. "Martian Quest" itself is a transliteration of the standard Western plot: stranger with mysterious past rides in from off-planet to a farming community in the reclaimed Martian desert, meets a fine woman, encounters distrust and rejection, solves the community's problem and saves all.

Similarly, Brackett's Eric John Stark blurs the boundaries of the Western, heroic fantasy and science fiction, and could serve as a kind of template for much modern fantasy. A civilized man, Stark reverts under stress to savage N'Chaka, the Man-Without-a-Tribe:

> He had begun fighting almost before he could stand. Born in a mining colony in Mercury's Twilight Belt, he had fought to live on a planet that did not encourage life; his parents were dead, his foster parents a tribe of sub-human aboriginals clawing a precarious existence out of the sun-stricken valleys. He had fought, without success, the men who slaughtered those foster-parents and put him in a cage, a snarling curiosity. Later on, he had fought for a different kind of survival, the survival of himself as a man. [*The Ginger Star*]

Stark was created just after the stories of *Martian Quest*, in 1944, in a tale set on Brackett's familiar Mars, "Lorelei of the Red Mists" — a story completed by Ray Bradbury when Brackett was called to Hollywood to work on *The Big Sleep*. Brackett brought him back, relocated to Mercury, in her last three novels, the Skaith series.

A few further signs and landmarks.

In 1946 Brackett married Edmond Hamilton, the two of them moving four years later from Southern California to an abandoned farmhouse without electricity and with only a well for water outside Kinsman, Ohio. With studios beset by strikes and other disruptions, Brackett again turned to writing science fiction. From 1948

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till 1951 she published better than a dozen stories. Then, with publication of *Shadow Over Mars* (1951) and *The Starmen* (1952), she began concentrating on book-length fiction. Further novels followed: *The Sword of Rhiannon* in 1953 (in an Ace Double with Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Conqueror*), *The Big Jump* in 1955 (in an Ace Double with Philip K. Dick's first novel, *Solar Lottery*), *The Long Tomorrow* in 1955. Of the last, Hamilton wrote:

> When she first came to Ohio, she was greatly intrigued by the Amish folk here who continue their old, simple way of life in the midst of the modern world. This led her to remark that if modern civilization disappeared, the Amish would be perfectly fitted to live in a nonmechanical world – and that remark grew into a novel.

Though for many it comes first to mind upon hearing the author's name, *The Long Tomorrow*, with its tale of a rural, religious-based culture surviving destruction of the cities in nuclear war, is something of an exception. *The Sword of Rhiannon* is far more typical. Earthman Matt Carse, dealer in Martian antiquities and thief, is projected back a million years to a time when the Martian landscape was verdant and there becomes involved in an age-old struggle; he wins liberation for the spirit of the once-accursed Rhiannon and returns to the present with his new love, Princess Ywain.

Brackett published several more novels with Ace in the sixties, then in 1974 and 1976, with Ballantine, the series of three Skaith novels reintroducing Eric John Stark. Two collections also appeared. Ace brought out *The Halfling and Other Stories* in 1973. And from Doubleday in 1977, the year before Brackett's death, came *The Best of Leigh Brackett*. Edited by husband Hamilton, it was paired with Brackett's own editing of *The Best of Edmond Hamilton*.

Anyone who reads a single page of *Martian Quest* will understand what Mike Moorcock meant in writing that, with Brackett, it's the atmosphere that gets you: the visuality and sheer physicality of her writing, the reflective landscapes that become, themselves, a species of narrative. In that, and in the doomed struggles and ultimate indomitability of her characters, Mike feels she was a guide, a trailblazer.

* * *

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I grew up on stories by Brackett, Kuttner, Sturgeon, and their contemporaries, moving pretty much in a straight line from pabulum to solid food to science fiction. Reading Brackett's earliest work again after all these years reminds me of the early hold science fiction had on me and causes me to consider how deeply not only my taste in literature but my very view of the world was formed by science fiction. The stories in *Martian Quest* and I are of an age. I limp. They don't.

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M. Rickert has quietly garnered a strong reputation as a powerful fabulist with stories such as "Leda," "The Girl Who Ate Butterflies," and most recently, "The Chambered Fruit." Her new story might help both revelers and Scrooges get in the mood for the winter holiday season.

Peace on Suburbia

By M. Rickert

THE CHILDREN COME HOME from school, spinning off the bus, screaming nonsense, waving at glowering strangers in their warm cars, then running into the house, shedding coats, dropping book bags with heavy thuds, and racing up the stairs to open the refrigerator and stare at its cheesy, milky, brown lettuce contents and moan about hunger and homework. You say, "Close the refrigerator. Choose something healthy. How about an apple?" and your son looks up at you with those blue eyes that have recently become hooded by eleven-year-old lids that do not reveal the clear wide beauty you remember and says, "I think I'm going to be one of those kids who die young."

"What?"

He shrugs. Turns away. "So it doesn't matter what I eat."

You don't know what to say. He wanders out of the room and you stand there, your mouth hanging open, and wonder if he is right, which sends a shiver down your spine that causes you to lose your mind, evidenced by your daughter standing there talking and you have no idea

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what she's saying. She spins away, like a nutcracker snowflake or a Sufi dervish.

You are worn out from the weekend spent with your parents. Your mother will not admit that your father is dying, though the hospice workers said, well, not that word, but that they were there to "help with the final stages of life," and your father, his eyes closed, his breath heavy, but sitting in his favorite chair and only a minute before talking to you, must have heard them, though he gave no sign and your mother nodded as though she understood but later, after he had gone to bed and you had called home to make sure everything was fine she sighed and said, "Don't change your plans for Christmas. This could go on for years."

"I want the ones I circled most and the ones with stars I want a lot and the ones with stars and circles I also want." Your daughter hands you the Target insert from Sunday's newspaper. You flip through the pages and see that almost everything is starred or circled or starred and circled. She even starred a box of tampons, which, actually, are on sale at a very good price. You stare at it until you feel like crying and then you set it on the kitchen counter, carefully, as though you will peruse it closely later to discern out of all those circles or stars and circles-and-stars what is the right combination to give your daughter a perfect Christmas.

The thing is, you might not need a box of tampons that large. Things are changing, you notice, your emotions especially seem so strange lately, as though they weren't yours at all, the way they used to feel like they came from you, but rather, they seem to be happening to you, like a train wreck. Mostly the emotion that keeps happening to you is the feeling that there isn't enough. Enough what, you couldn't say.

"Hey Mom, come look at this," your son calls from his bedroom where you find him lying on the floor. "I can shoot darts laying down." He does. The plastic dart with the dull tip sails through the air in a perfect arc and hits the dartboard with a small thwack. "Pretty cool, huh? I don't even gotta stand up."

"Is your homework done?"

"We had a substitute."

"Again? Was Mr. Festler out again?"

"She yelled at us because we were doing stuff RIGHT."

"What are you talking about?"

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"Mr. Festler says he wants us to share our work and help each other but Mrs. Buttface yelled at us and said we were cheaters."

"What's her real name?"

"Butta, Battaf. I don't know."

"Do your homework."

"What's the point?"

"I want you to stop talking that way right now, do you hear me?"

He looks at you as if he fully knows he is going to grow up and write a bestselling book about his recovery from your abuse which will make him a very rich man whom no one will begrudge because look what you put him through and says, "Well, why should I do it when she ain't even gonna be there tomorrow and we'll have some other teacher who won't even look at it?"

You turn and walk out of the room. You finally learned not to answer these questions that unwind only more questions and put off the inevitable task the questions seek to avoid. You wonder what he is muttering but you just keep walking to the kitchen where your daughter sits at the table bent with serious expression over her homework. She looks up at you and smiles.

"That's quite a lot of stuff you circled and starred," you say.

She shrugs. "I just thought I could show Santa everything I want, but I don't expect all of it."

You nod, slowly. It's a hard game, this. What does she know? What does she believe? Doesn't it seem strange to circle things in the Target catalog for Santa Claus to bring? After all, she's eight years old. Certainly she can't be so gullible? Certainly she knows the truth?

The phone rings. You answer it.

"Did you hear?"

You hate it when he calls from the cell phone. His voice crackles like a fire or an old man's voice and he isn't old. Or burning.

"Mr. Fensletter was out again. Don't you think this is getting a little strange?"

"They declared war. Turn on CNN."

You don't even get to say good-bye. You stand there saying his name over and over again but you've lost the connection and it's only a coincidence that it's happened at this time which makes it seem so

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apocalyptic. You hang up the phone. It has begun to snow. You stare at the falling snow.

"It's snowing!" your daughter shouts. Your son comes out of his room, a pencil tucked behind his ear. He blinks rapidly, and his eyes widen, he grins at you and says maybe tomorrow will be a snow day.

You ruin it by saying no, the weather report says it'll be just an inch and then you hug him which he allows for a full thirty seconds before he pulls away and walks into his room as though things are vastly safer in there.

The snow swirls big beautiful flakes that fall and fall without a sound.

You go downstairs into the cold family room of your split-level ranch. You like this room in the summer and hate it in the winter. You lift cushions and blankets and pillows and shoes until, in exasperation, you stand in the middle of the room and feel your chest expand, your breath fill with anger and then you see it in the damnedest of places, right where it belongs, on top of the television. You pick up the remote control and aim it at the TV. You walk to the couch and sit at the edge of it as you press through the channels, which almost all feature someone beautiful in an open collar revealing a young throat, you press through to CNN and then sit and look at the blue screen dotted by spots of light that blink bright and dim while someone's voice says things you only vaguely hear like "explosions" and "missiles" and "Mom?"

You point and press the power button.

She stands before you with her hair pulled back in an undone braid, her eyes clear and bright, she looks at you as if she knows something so immense you could never understand it and you wonder where she got that expression from.

"Oprah," you say.

She nods but smirks as she does, so you think she knows you weren't watching Oprah at all. How long had she been standing there?

"They want a talk to you."

"Who?"

"The men. At the door."

You open your mouth and close it. Haven't you told her a million times not to answer the door without you? You walk up the stairs and find three men standing politely on the front porch, in the snow, the door wide

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open. You look at your daughter. She looks at the bearded strangers, only curious, with no idea that she just risked all your lives. How to make her understand danger? You turn to the men who all smile and actually sort of bow. "We've come for your son," the tallest one says.

"What?"

The tall man steps forward slightly. "We have gifts."

You notice that all three men carry packages wrapped in brown paper tied with string.

"There seems to be some mistake," you say, beginning to inch the door shut.

You hear him coming down the hall, the pad of his feet against the carpet. You press the door shut faster but not fast enough and for a moment their eyes meet; your son, and the strangers whose eyes widen when they see him. You push the door shut and lock it.

"Who were they?"

"Salesmen." You turn to your daughter. "Didn't I tell you never to open the door to strangers?"

"I think they're still out there."

You make sure the door is locked and then you tell your children, in a calm voice, to get back to their homework. They ignore you but don't follow as you go through the house making sure all the doors are locked.

"They're going!" your son calls. "Hey, they left us presents!"

"Don't touch that door."

"But they left us presents."

"Go do your homework."

He mutters. Again you do not ask him what he's saying. Your daughter stands there, watching you. "Homework," you order.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

She shrugs and walks away slowly, as if weary and old.

You look out the window. The packages, simply wrapped, sit in the snow. What if it's anthrax? Smallpox? A bomb? Oh Jesus, what if they are bombs? You run to the telephone, dial 911. All in a rush you tell the operator about the three strangers, the packages, the possibilities you've imagined.

"Well, did you try shaking them?"

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"What? Are you kidding?"

"Maybe it's just chocolate or something."

"Who are you? What are you doing answering this phone? Don't you know they've declared war? Don't you know we're in real danger here?"

"You don't have to be so hysterical. I'll send someone over. The fire department, how's that? But you should know you're not in any danger."

"How would you know that? Hello? Hello?"

You try calling your husband but you only get a recording saying that the cell phone customer is out of reach at this time. The fire engine comes wailing down the street and pulls into your driveway. Your children come running into the living room to look out the large picture window that overlooks the porch and driveway. The fire engine has a green wreath attached to the front with a paper menorah in the center. The firemen jump out of the truck and then they just stand there talking to the one with the fanciest hat. Your children narrate everything that's happening in excited voices. "They're standing around talking. The light is still going. Oh look, now he's coming on the porch." They both squeal away from the window heading toward the stairs until you command them back. They groan but run back to the window, giggling. "He's shaking them! Now he's smelling them! He's ringing — "

The doorbell rings. The children scream.

"Calm down," you yell. "Stay right there." They stare at you like wounded animals, perfectly still. You walk down the stairs. Open the door. You hear the children behind you, at the top of the stairs.

The fireman has a face like chiseled rock, and kind eyes. He holds, in his big hands, the presents wrapped in simple brown paper with string for bows. "I don't think you got anything to worry about here."

"Please. Just take them away."

He looks over your shoulder and smiles. "How you doing?" he says.

"Good." Your son answers as if they know each other.

"I just think, well, you know, under the circumstances, just some admirers probably left these."

"Admirers?"

Behind him the other firemen are all creeping closer to the porch, pointing and whispering.

"Just take them away," you say again.

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"Sure." The fireman smiles but he is not smiling at you. You turn to follow the direction of his gaze. Your son smiles down at him. You move to block the exchange.

"Well, all right then," the fireman says. He turns. You close the door.

"What was that all about?"

Your son shrugs.

"Do you know him?"

He shrugs again.

The phone rings. You walk upstairs to answer it. The children stand at the window waving as the fire engine backs out of your driveway. Several firemen wave back. You don't see faces, just hands, waving through the falling snow.

Your mother is on the phone. She is crying. At first you think it is about the war but then your realize it is about your father. Oh yes, she's saying, he's gone completely nuts now. He says he sees angels. She cries and you try to comfort her. "We'll come up," you say, "we'll leave after dinner." What are you talking about, she says. Aren't the kids still in school? "But he's dying," you say. For a moment there is only silence and then she says, "Not yet he ain't. He's sitting right here eating goulash. You want a talk to him?" You hear her saying, "Your daughter thinks you're dying" and then his voice, the one you remember from before he got sick, "How's my girl? How's my girl?"

You feel like crying for that old voice. "Dad?" you say, and your own voice cracks as if he is already a ghost.

"Don't you go burying me yet, little girl. I'm feeling great. Just great."

You can hear your mother in the background, your father's muffled reply. "Dad?"

"Your mother says to tell you about the angels."

"Angels?"

"Yeah. But I don't think she believes me. You do, don't you?"

"So you're seeing angels?"

"If I only knowed, you know?" he says all earnest. "I tried to be a good father."

"You were, Dad."

"So the angels tell me our grandson's going to be some kind a hero."

"He is?"

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"Don't that make you proud? What's that? Your mother says to tell you how the angels look, you want a hear?"

"Yeah, sure, but also, what's this about him being a hero?"

"First they is real small like fairies, you know?"

"Fairies?"

"Yeah, tiny like snowflakes. Hell, first time they came I thought it was snowing right in my bed. Jesus Christ, I thought I was losing my mind."

"But you weren't?"

"Heh, heh. Good one. But then they sort of grow and it's just what you expect, a lot of light, wings, you know, angels." He lowers his voice. "Listen I want a talk to you about your mother. I think maybe she's got the oldzheimers she's — " Suddenly his voice booms through the receiver, "So? Is that right?"

"Dad, what do you mean a hero?"

"Well, you know," he says and then your mother is back on the phone.

"Fairies," she says. "Snowflakes that turn into angels."

"It's snowing here," you say.

"Not you too?"

"No. Snow. You know, flakes. Outside. Mom? What's he talking about?"

"Who knows? Nothing makes sense."

"Have you talked to his doctor? Called the hospice?"

"The doctor's too busy to talk to me. The hospice workers all wanta come and take over the house but they don't know nothing. You know what one of them says to me?"

"What?"

"She says, well maybe he really does see angels."

"What did you say?"

"I said nothing. I got one person to talk nonsense with all day. I don't need another."

"Mom? Did you hear the news? About the war?"

"War? That ain't news. War happens every day. Did I tell you about Hilda Mealene's daughter? You remember Tanya, don't you? She went to school with you?"

"Listen, Mom. I gotta go. Can I call you later? Tonight?"

She says good-bye and you stand there listening to the dial tone.

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That's how things have always been with your mother. You hurt her feelings all the time though you don't mean to, not since you were a teenager. You hang up the phone. Walk down the hall. Your son lies on his bed doing his homework.

"Honey, do you ever see, you know, angels?"

As soon as you say it you know you are doomed. He will remember this question, this absurd question and it will rend him from you forever. He will enter his teen years remembering that you asked him such a thing and he will describe you and know you always by this single mistake. It will define you and your relationship and it's happened and you can't take it back. You turn away.

"Sometimes," he says. "Just the usual."

You stop and consider this fantastic reply. You can't think of anything to say. You walk down the hall and find your daughter standing at the window, watching the snow fall. Sometimes you catch her like this, in a dreamy state, she turns and looks at you with a beatific smile.

"Honey, do you see angels?"

She walks over to you and lays one small warm hand with purple painted fingernails on your thigh. She looks up at you but suddenly you feel small. She doesn't answer your question, she just stands there smiling and touching you as if she is sainted. As if you are forgiven.

You watch the snow fall. Your daughter wanders out of the room. Across the street, the Smythe's Christmas lights glow primary colors against the white and down the road several more houses are lit with color and white, a deer made out of light and a moose.

Suddenly one of those feelings comes to you, the way that's been happening lately. Standing there, in the dim December living room, you see flakes of falling light and for just a moment you are part of this light and its silence. This is temporary, but it is enough.

Across the street shepherds gather and point at your house. No, they must be school children, carolers, a large family from a foreign country. In the distance you hear the voices of your own children. You don't know what they're saying but by the pitch you can tell they're fighting. You walk to the window and press your fingers against the cold glass. The shepherds kneel in the snow. You watch them for a moment, then you pull the drapes shut.

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Daniel Abraham's short fiction has appeared in Asimov's SF, Absolute Magnitude, The Silver Web, *and a handful of anthologies, including* Vanishing Acts *and* Bones of the World. *His first tale for us is a clever crime story of the near future. Mr. Abraham reports that his first novel,* Unreal City, *is due to be published by Meisha Merlin early in 2004.*

Pagliacci's Divorce

By Daniel Abraham

"IT'S NOT RIGHT," I SAID, shaking my head, "and I know it's not right. But I can't figure it."

Carly, my ex-wife, leaned against the stone railing and frowned down into the river. She had more lines in her face these days, and the black dress and good haircut made her look professional. Even the sunglasses seemed more expensive and grown up. Still too thin, though.

Two kids came across the bridge on bicycles, whooping and yelling at each other. We were quiet while they passed.

Carly took a joint out of her handbag, put the whole thing in her mouth and pulled it out again, damping it with spit before she lit it. It was one of my old pet peeves, like the way she left the shower on while she was drying off and watched my email over my shoulder. This time, it was good to see, just because it made things easier. Still a nasty habit, though.

"So who is the guy?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "He showed up at my place one day, just like any other client. He wanted a new life for a while. Nothing big. He just

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wanted me to make him a card, change the sequence to something close — you know, something that'd give the same phenotype, pass the basic tests — but not too close. I figured he wanted cover for something I didn't need to know about."

"Standard," Carly agreed.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. But when I started working, it was seriously broken."

She turned to look at me, a low cloud of burning hemp seeping out her mouth, thick as cotton. She breathed it away and tilted her head the way she did when she was really listening. It was the first time she'd looked straight at me since I'd walked out to the middle of the span to meet her. She was curious. She was hooked.

"Middle of chromosome eighteen, right where there should be a great big lovely stretch of junk DNA, and I find this vicious oncogene. Breast cancer. Classic form and sequence."

"Weird-ass crossover?" she suggested.

"There were three copies," I said. "Right up against each other. Not even a base pair in between. No way."

She nodded.

"I don't know who this guy is, but for sure what's on that card isn't his genome," I said, then paused for a beat and looked down at the river. "And I know that someone wanted me to know it."

"So how do I fit in?"

"The guy said he heard about me from Damon Weiss," I said. "I figured if it was a message, it was maybe for you."

The name hung in the air. I ran my fingertips along the smooth stone railing. Carly coughed out a little laugh, absolutely mirthless. The two bicycle kids were speeding through a little Japanese garden farther down the park, flying along paths so I could only see them in glimpses.

"It would be kind of dumb to send a message through you," she said. "No reason to think you'd deliver it."

"I did, though," I said. "And he'd know I would. It's this psychic bond guys get when they screw the same girl."

"Don't," she said.

"Besides, if you wouldn't expect it, the cops wouldn't either."

"No. I guess not."

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The kids and their bikes vanished around a curve. The silence stretched out, awkward and tense. Same as always.

"I don't know what it would mean," she said. "I mean, if it was for me."

"Get a mammogram?"

"Jesus Christ. Has everything got to be a joke with you? This is serious."

"Sorry."

"It's not a game."

"I just thought you should know. Just in case."

She nodded and took another drag.

"Yeah," she said. "Well, thanks."

"De nada. Here, pass that over here."

I took a hit, then held the thin white paper in my hand. A hand-rolled joint filled with engineered pot from Iowa, burning cherry at one end, pink lipstick at the other. The whole thing was like living with her — nothing fit together but it all worked. For a little while at least. I passed it back.

"So. How've you been doing?" she asked, and I looked at her like she'd farted. She let it drop.

"I've got to go," I said. "Wear more clothes. You're going to catch something."

I walked away. If she waved, I didn't see it. If she said anything, I didn't hear it. She might have been flipping me off for all I knew. The path curved south, then bent west and spilled out on the street where the park ended and the university started. In between semesters like this, the people were few and far between, but the coffee shop was still open. I walked across the street, and then the plaza on the other side, wading through a flock of unimpressed pigeons.

Eric Li sat at one of the indoor tables sipping from a cup of coffee and pretending to read a newspaper tuned to CNN. I slid in across from him.

"You shouldn't have come straight here. She might have followed you," he said in his slushy Chinese accent.

"She didn't," I said.

He looked up at me. I raised a hand and a waiter came over. I asked for a chai and a bar of khatra. Li curled his lip. I told the waiter to put it on Li's bill.

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"I don't think she believed you," Li said.

"She bought it," I said, pulling the wire out of my lapel. It was no bigger than a needle, and matte black. "I lived with her for six years. I know what she sounds like when she's not interested, and I know what she sounds like when she trying to act like she's not interested. They're different breeds."

Li didn't look impressed as he tucked the wire into his pocket.

"I suppose we'll know if you're right when she tries to contact him," he said.

"She will. If she knows where he is."

"We think she does."

The waiter brought the chai and khatra. I sipped one and chewed the other. Li put his paper on standby and folded it under his arm.

"I wanted to be a cop when I was a kid," I said. "You realize I graduated high school in the top five percent? I was damn near valedictorian."

"Your broken dreams of childhood touch me."

"Fine, then. Make your own small talk."

"We'll be in touch, Mr. Pagliacci."

I GOT BACK TO my studio in the middle of the afternoon. There were eight messages on my system, all junk mail. I watched one of the porn ads all the way through, just because the girl was cute. Gen'd, but cute. I did a systems check and switched over to my business account — everything triple encrypted with the latest algorithms so that the only way to get it was to hit me in the mouth until I wrote out the passcode. Or else do what Li had done; ask nicely and be a cop.

The sad fact was nobody in the city forged documents or pimped or laundered data unless they also informed. If you played well with Li and his species, you stayed in business. If you didn't, you didn't. We were a tacit branch of law enforcement, unloved and unlovable. And because of that, we got to break the law.

I read over three messages, checked the digital signatures. Two quick and dirty rewrites. One fresh build for a guy who apparently had lived all his life in some third-world hole and never got his genome on file. There was nothing that couldn't wait, so I let them sit.

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It was a nice apartment, physically, though smaller than ones I'd lived in when I was young — a testament to a life of lowered expectations. Tenth floor, but with a decent view of the bay. I'd ripped out the drywall when I moved in, so it was mostly exposed brickwork now. The main room was about the size of a studio, but it seemed smaller. The sequencers, the microcentrifuge, PCR tank, genomic database, parallel generation array, and double-wide refrigerator took most of the space. The white noise made listening to music while I worked difficult. The back room — where I slept and ate — was maybe half as big as the front, but it was quiet.

All in all, the place was about the size of one of Damon Weiss's closets. My guess was Carly's clothes wouldn't have fit unless she hung the shoes out the window. Since I hadn't taken it until after Carly ditched me, I'd never actually conducted the experiment.

I waited for a couple hours, watching old movies on the system. When the first wave of nausea hit, I went to the back room, pulled up a trash can filled with newspapers I'd shredded for the purpose, and waited. I put some oldies on the system — James Brown, Rabid Clan, Clash. The hardest working man in show business was just starting to shriek about how good he felt when I started vomiting.

It was a long night.

"What happened to you?" Kurt asked, pushing a cup of coffee across the table toward me. Any other morning, it would have smelled good.

"Carly."

"Well that goes without saying, but the proximal cause, boyo. The proximal cause."

"Same. Carly. Saw her yesterday."

Kurt leaned back in his chair. His eyes narrowed to black slits. The clatter of fork on plate and the conversational hum of the café passed for silence while he looked me over. He was getting older too — no more the young punk with the heavy braided hair. He wore suits these days — cheap, but suits — and he had more gray to the temple than I did.

"No, you didn't."

"Did."

"What for?"

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I shrugged and took a sip of the coffee. My stomach twisted like a live fish on a frying pan and I pushed the cup away.

"You're not.... Oh, boyo, tell me you aren't trying to hook back up with the bitch now that Weiss is underground. You know how stupid that would be."

"I've done my time," I said.

"You talking about the girl or the lockup?"

I smiled. "I had some business with her. That's all."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Kurt nodded and took a sip from his coffee cup.

"You sold her to the cops, didn't you?"

"I'm not saying that," I said.

Something passed over him — distress or disappointment. He leaned forward, almost over the table, and when he spoke his voice was low enough not to carry past the two of us.

"Right. And so I'm not saying that selling out Damon Weiss is more than your sorry ass is worth. Or that it's just like those soulless bastards to lean on you to lean on her. Or that if I can figure it out, you can be damn sure other people will, too, so you better stop talking about it, and I mean at all."

"You're not saying that, eh?"

"Nope."

"So why're you talking?"

"I've got such a pretty voice," Kurt said, leaning back.

I coughed and took out the cards — bright and shining, and coded with a plausible set of genomes along the lines Kurt had ordered, DNA I'd cooked myself, microsampled, and bonded to the plastic. It was better than a fingerprint, and it would hold up unless they actually sequenced the whole thing out. Years of dealing poker showed in the way Kurt scooped them away.

"Payment as usual," I said.

"It's already in the account."

"Good. You got anything coming?"

"Yeah. I've got a guy looking to skip bail. He needs a retrovirus mouthwash — just enough to beat the cheek scrape if he's stopped at the border."

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"He need a card to go with it?"

"Yeah."

"How soon?"

"Two weeks."

"Can't," I said. "I'm low on virii right now. A month, and I'll have everything I'd need."

"He's in trouble. I told him you were the best."

"And you don't stay the best by screwing up a retrovirus. A month or find someone else."

Kurt raised hands, like he was afraid I'd hit him. I leaned over and threw a little punch at his knuckles. He laughed. The waitress walked by with a plate of eggs and bacon. The smell must have turned me a little green, because Kurt leaned forward again.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice sincere for the first time since I'd come in. "Seriously, you look pounded."

I looked down. If I was going to sell it, this was the moment.

"You ever regret how you lived your life? I mean, neither of us is ever going to screw a twenty-year-old again without paying. And I get to thinking, you know? Who I thought I'd be by now. What I thought life would be like. And all the things that I thought were important back then...it doesn't carry the same weight now."

"You can't think about that. Guys like us, we've got to keep moving."

"I know. But Kurt. You see I wouldn't have sold Carly out if I didn't have to, right? They were going to close me down if I didn't. What am I going to do if not this? Tech support?"

Kurt nodded. His black eyes only looked tired now. After enough years in this business, we had a lot of the same kinds of ghosts.

"She screwed you over. Ratting her out...hey, maybe it's just karma, right? The situation came up. Nobody to blame. It's not like you set out to do it."

"I didn't have a choice," I insisted.

"I know you didn't. I know. It sucks. It's just...Jesus. If Weiss finds out."

"Or Carly."

"Christ, yes. Or Carly."

"Keep it to yourself, then."

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"I will."

He wouldn't. Kurt had risen to his level of the profession. He was a connection, good enough not to give it away for free, but he wouldn't sit on something this big forever. He'd wait until there was a good price for it before he sold me. The two of us had been friends for decades, and he'd sell me.

If I'd played right, he'd sell me to Li.

"Thanks," I said.

I MET CARLY in college. I was writing papers for spare cash and still dreaming of going to med school. She was a chemistry major making her way by cooking meth and selling it out of the University Hospital ER. Back then, she still laughed at my jokes. For a while, we were perfect.

She saw where we were headed before I did. My first big failure came in my senior year, hacking the anti-plagiarism spiders on the university system. It got to be a challenge, seeing how much I could get away with. For the most part, the teachers closed their eyes and trusted the tech. I'd passed the same paper off six different times in a year before one of the professors actually noticed. The kid ratted me out, of course. I got thrown out more for the hack job than the papers.

Carly told me then I was stupid. I told her I'd get a better angle on it next time, but she didn't laugh. She set me up with a friend of hers who was fixing cards for convicts and foreigners — they were the only ones tracked way back then.

There were two good years before we got married, then two more good ones after that, then a year and maybe eight months not so great, and five months of hell.

I came home late one night to our little place. I'd been screwing around with two different waitresses from two different nightclubs, just seeing how long I could juggle it without them finding out about each other — or Carly about either — and I had my excuses all lined up. Stories about where I'd been and why I'd been there. Carly was waiting for me. Her bags were packed. As I remember it, I didn't say anything much at first.

"I'm out, Pag," was how she put it.

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I asked her why, as if it wasn't obvious.

"You're still a little kid. Everything's a game to you; it doesn't matter if an angle makes sense as long as you think it's pretty. You've always got to prove you're smarter than anyone else, and it makes you stupid."

I told her that didn't make any sense. Being smart didn't make you stupid. And if I decided to do what I did with a little artistry, where was the problem? She just shook her head, picked up her bag, and headed for the door.

"You want to be an artist, do it on your own time," she said, and that was the last I heard of her for years. I didn't think to check the bank accounts until morning. They were cleaned out.

I lost clients more because no one wants to put their lives and chances for prison in the hands of a man who is not only working for the cops but also drunk off his ass and likely to give you a card that codes you as the wrong gender. I spent a couple years in prison because I got sloppy. I blamed Carly, though.

When she and Weiss got married, I decided to put myself back together. The night they headed off for their honeymoon, I proposed to a red-headed girl who lived down the hall. She said no, and that I was drunk.

That was eight years ago. By the time Li came to me with his oncogene-on-chromosome-eighteen story, I'd been apart from Carly longer than I'd been with her. I knew for sure because I'd done the math.

Weeks passed with no word from Li or Kurt. I was still thinking about Carly, about Weiss, about the ways that two men who love the same woman are rivals and the ways that they're the same, when my system told me about the guy. He was short, balding, swarthy, and standing outside my door, shifting from one foot to the other like he had to piss.

Amateur, I thought, and opened the line.

"What?" I asked.

On the system console, the guy leaned in like he was talking to the door.

"I'm looking for a Mr. Pagliacci. I...I understand he does some consulting work?"

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"Put your arms at your sides," I said. "You're being scanned for weapons. Don't move until I say so."

The guy went stiff as a board and I turned off the audio. The poor little puke actually seemed to believe I had some kind of sensor array outside. I took a beer out of the double-wide, twisted off the cap, and sat there watching the guy until it stopped being fun.

"Okay," I said, loud enough to carry through the door even without a channel open. "Come on in."

The guy looked more or less the same in the flesh. Small, mousy, nervous, amateur. Looking back at it, I have to say I didn't have a clue. The guy was a pro.

"What can I do for you?"

"I...um...I need a card. I'm in a little trouble. I have to get in to see my wife. Well, my ex-wife. But she has my card blocked, see? I can't even get in her building, so...."

I held up a hand.

"I don't need details. Just gimme your card."

He handed it over, smiling an apology as he did. I slipped it into the reader, waited while it did the analysis. I went into my routine about costs and options, the words coming out by muscle memory, I'd said it all so many times. The guy leaned forward, like he was sucking in every word. He must have been pissing himself laughing on the inside.

The reader chimed. I lost my place in my patter and pulled up the system output. The genome was mine — the sequence to build a fresh Pagliacci — except for a doubled testis determining factor on the Y. A portrait of the fixer with twice the balls of any ordinary man. It might as well have said I will delve one yard below their mines and blow them at the Moon.

You get them, Carly, I thought. Give 'em hell.

"I'm not under surveillance," I said. "You can talk straight if you want."

"I don't know what you mean," the guy said, never breaking character.

"Sorry," I said, pulling the card and going with the farce. If I'd been doing his job, I wouldn't have trusted me to know whether I was being surveilled either. "Okay. No, I can't do it. You've got some pretty specific

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markers there. If you really want it, it'll be viral work, and that'll take time."

"But she's leaving in a month!"

Now that I knew to look for it, there was a twinkle in the guy's eye. He was enjoying himself.

"You want my advice?"

The guy nodded.

"Forget about her," I said. "Keep going after a woman who doesn't want you around, it'll only make you sad and crazy."

He made a few more weak objections, turned, left. I had the system lock down the door behind him. I took out the log that included the guy's sequence and wrote zeros to the sectors it had been on. Eric Li could whistle for it.

It was like the moment playing a dangerous shot in a game of pool when I'd sunk the ball I wanted, and the only thing left was waiting to see if the cue ball stopped before the scratch.

It was a cool afternoon. The night's rain had cleared up and the Sun shone impotently over the bay. Li looked up at me, his expression reproachful.

"You're late," he said, his breath ghosting.

"I'm here."

I sat on the bench beside him, hunched into my jacket, and looked out over the bay, smelled the salt in the air, listened to the racket of gulls. Anything but focus on Li. He was silent, and I could see him in the corner of my eye, considering me. I shrugged, trying to look bored, trying not to sweat, fighting the sensation that my balls were trying to crawl up into my belly.

"We were right," Li said. "She did know."

"Good for you."

"Twenty minutes after she left the meeting, she called an anonymized system in Brazil."

"Okay."

"The next day she sent another message to the same place. We had the right monitors on. We traced it."

"You traced an anonymized system?"

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"We're good at what we do. But we have a problem."

Panic and despair can feel a lot alike. The heaviness in the belly. The sense of nausea and vertigo. The feeling that everything that had ever happened before was getting erased. All your decisions are already made — the past passes judgment.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"You. You very nearly gave our game away. If Mr. Datwyler had not been so civic-minded, he might have told your ex-wife that she had been sold. That would have been inconvenient."

"Kurt?"

"As you say. Kurt."

I didn't grin. I didn't. Thank you, Kurt, you little rat.

"He's a friend of mine. I didn't tell him anything. He just kind of guessed."

"Yes. So he said as well. And that you were very much distressed."

"I had to talk to someone," I said. "Carly...Carly was important to me. She is important."

"You are still in love with your ex-wife." It wasn't a question. I looked over. Li was smirking now. "And so, you betray her. That's very sad."

"What can I say? You've got such lovely eyes, Mr. Li. You ask me for something and I just get all aquiver. Now do we have some actual business to do here? I'm cold."

"There is a man who may come to you. His name is Isaac Roebbel. Whatever he asks, do it for him at your usual price. Then tell me what precisely he required."

"And if I say no?"

Li didn't dignify that with an answer. I shrugged again and stood up.

"If I see him, I'll let you know."

"Yes, you will."

Li turned to his paper again. It was tuned to some kind of police newsletter.

"Hey, Li."

He looked up. His expression was patient and sorrowful and insincere.

"You let me know when you get Weiss, will you? Not just know where he is, but actually get the collar."

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"If you would like. You're a very vindictive man, Mr. Pagliacci."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess I am."

I CAME IN AT MIDNIGHT with a sandwich from the all-night deli on the street. The front room hummed, LEDs glowing like Christmas lights that never came down. I dropped the sandwich on the table, sat, kicked off my shoes and checked my system. Junk mail. I was about to switch over to my business account when I smelled the smoke — hemp and tobacco.

I got up slow, but she was already in the doorway to the back room. She was in jeans and a leather jacket. The cherry on her joint glowed in the dim.

"Hey, Carly."

"Hey."

"What're you doing here?"

"Depends on who you ask. Take your buddy, Li. Ask him, and I'm not here at all. He's pretty sure I'm at a bar on Clinton."

"Taking off for good, then?"

She nodded and shrugged. She looked better without the sunglasses, younger in the half-light. Like when I'd been with her, back when we'd been young and things had been good, all possibilities open, all the games still winnable.

"I miss Damon," she said. "And it's looking like he's going to stay underground for a long time."

"He must be a hell of a guy."

"He's all right. I love him."

"Well, that makes it all okay, then. You want a beer?"

"Sure."

I opened the fridge and pulled a couple of longnecks out, popping off the screwtops with a flick of the wrist. She sat on the PCR tank and took the bottle I offered her.

"I fell for it, you know," she said.

"Yeah. Li told me. Sorry I wasn't more direct. I was being watched."

"Figured. I mean, afterward, I figured. You got sick too, didn't you?"

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"Had to," I said. "Wasn't another vector I could count on. You used a private doctor, right?"

"Damon has one on payroll."

"What'd he say?"

"Just that I had a really nasty short-term gastric virus with a couple thousand extraneous stop codons on it. Then I remembered how you told me I'd catch something. And two and two being what they are.... Besides. It was the kind of thing you'd do."

"Hope it wasn't too bad," I said.

"It was vile, but hey, thanks anyway. You want?"

She held out the joint, and I took it. Our fingers touched for a little bit longer than they needed to. The smoke felt good.

"So this mean you're not pissed at me anymore?" she asked.

"I've been thinking a lot about...about us. We were kids. And Weiss...I don't know the guy. And it looks like he takes care of you okay. So that's all good."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. Why not? He's better than Li, anyway. The Chinese tweak's going to burst a blood vessel out when he figures out the case went south on him."

"Hard life," Carly said and reached for the joint. I passed it back. "What'll you do if he figures it was you?"

"He won't. He won't think I'm innocent, but he's already got something I'm guilty of. He's pissed at me for letting it slip that I'd sold you. It's a trick I learned when I was inside. If you really need to get out of something big, frame yourself for something small."

Carly took another drag, holding in the smoke and considering the joint.

"Good thing I was smoking that day," she said. "Would have been suspicious if you'd been trying to spit in my mouth."

"I would have kissed you."

"You would have tried."

I tried then. She watched me all the way in with a poker face so straight I didn't know if I was screwing up or not until she kissed back.

"Damon would probably kill us both if we screwed right now," I said. "I mean, even if it was just for old time's sake."

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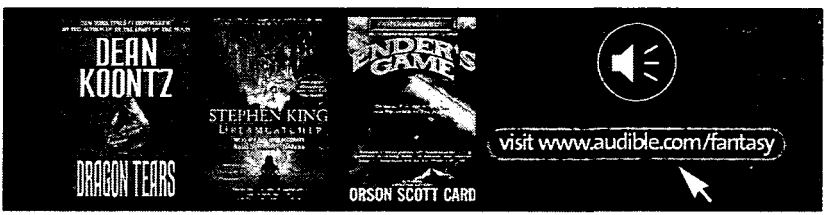

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"Probably."

"Well, I'm thinking I'm not ready to be dead just yet. You want to come back in about five or six years, when we've got a little less on the line?"

She kissed me again. Then, gentle and solid, she pushed me back and hopped down off the PCR tank.

"Thanks for everything," she said.

"De nada."

I watched her walk away, watched the door close behind her. Outside, the Moon shone on the bay, just like it did when I was a kid. Carly was out there somewhere, and right now and for maybe another few minutes, her lips were going to taste like mine. I tried to imagine what he'd do when he heard about how I'd saved his ass. Chew his own guts out, I hoped.

"I win," I said, but Weiss, wherever he was, didn't hear.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Make Love, Not Flab

"Dear Mr. Van Gelder,

"I'm looking at all these science fiction writers in *Locus* and all I can think is...everyone appears overweight, pasty-skinned, saggy-faced, rummy-eyed, just plain tired...."

—Letter to the editor,
name withheld

"Anxious to avoid obesity? Don't make any major lifestyle changes. Instead, eat 100 fewer calories or burn 100 more a day.... To burn around 100 calories...swim for 10 minutes...ride your bike for 20 minutes...make love for an hour..."

—Elizabeth Large, *The Baltimore Sun*

THE PHONE rang, but I let the machine take the call. The doorbell sounded, but even though I was expecting a FedEx package containing the galley of my new novel, *The Qubit Quandary*, I ignored the summons. The clock showed half past one, well beyond the hour when I once used to quit work to watch my favorite soap opera, *The Anguish and the Sorrow*, but I resolutely kept the TV switched off.

I had to finish my quota of words and miles for the day, before the arrival of the woman from the Science Fiction Writers of America's Consort Bureau.

Strapped into the harness of my special exercycle that left my hands free to type on the laptop computer mounted between the handlebars, I pumped my legs while frantically composing. Sweat dripped off my chin onto the keyboard, but luckily the computer was a surplus military model hardened against such distress. As words flickered into being on the screen, the bike's odometer racked up the final mileage toward my morning exercise goal. Huffing and puffing, I

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managed to type the last word of a chapter just as the little LED readout showed ten miles.

Wearily, I let my legs come to a rest, saved the file, and powered down both bike and computer. (The telemetry on my exercise had already been automatically forwarded to SFWA.) I unbuckled myself and climbed off. A jug of Gatorade beckoned, and I grabbed it to swig down about half a liter. I was just toweling my face and neck when the doorbell rang once more. Damn! I had hoped to have time for a solitary shower, but it was not to be. I glanced at the clock, saw it was now two, and cursed once more the unvarying promptness of the SFWA Consort service.

I went to the door, towel around my shoulders, sweaty track suit clinging to my chest and legs. My mind was still swirling with complications of my narrative-in-progress, thoughts of tomorrow's writing. All in all, I felt about as ready for sex as a soggy dill pickle.

Dana stood smiling pleasantly, albeit a tad mechanically, on my doorstep. I didn't know her last name, since the Consorts were not allowed to give out that information. She was an attractive young woman with blonde hair in a pageboy cut, freckles across her nose, and a fine, ripe figure.

"Dana, what a surprise. I haven't seen you in six months."

"Just the regular rotation schedule. I've been serving in SFWA's Western Region, but now I'm back East and assigned to you. No personal motivations at all behind my absence. May I come in, please? The clock is ticking."

I repressed a sigh. "Certainly."

It was a warm day and Dana wore no coat. Once inside, she began efficiently to unbutton her blouse. She soon had it off, revealing the requisite rocket-imprinted bra which Victoria's Secret crafted exclusively for SFWA. She was unzipping her skirt to disclose her matching panties when she realized I was not making any comparable moves. She stopped undressing and looked at me with puzzlement.

"What's the problem? Oh, you need a shower. Well, we can certainly have one together, although as you must know, regulations allow only five point five minutes for that activity."

"Dana, forget the shower right now."

She regarded me closely. "Are you feeling sick? If you have a doctor's excuse, we can forego everything except post-coital cuddling."

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"No, I'm not sick, and I don't have a doctor's excuse. It's just — Well, Dana, do we have to make love today? Couldn't we just — oh, I don't know — sit and talk?"

Dana assumed a reproachful, monitory look. "You know darn well that's not what I'm getting paid for. I'm here to insure that you burn off one hundred calories, so that you can stay trim and fit and continue to produce bestsellers. This service is coming out of your SFWA dues, after all. Twenty thousand a year isn't pocket change, even for someone with your income. Don't you want maximum value for your money?"

"Naturally, but — "

"Was our lovemaking last time unsatisfactory in terms of metabolic stimulation rates? If so, you should have filled out Form Aitch-nine-one-five-dash-em. But barring that, I'm afraid that the terms of your SFWA membership mandate no less than fifty-five minutes of lovemaking, each and every day of the week."

"Yes, yes, I know all that. But I was just hoping — "

Dana glowered at me. "Hoping what? That perhaps you could suborn me from my duties? Perhaps with a bribe? I'm truly disappointed in you. Do you really think so little of me and my office? I'm not just some dumb bimbo, you know. May I remind you that we Consorts, male and female, are not your typical amateur escorts of old. We all belong to a guild of dedicated sexual therapists, whose only vital interests are the well-being of their clients. That's why we won the contract from SFWA, after all. And believe me, it was a tight race against Sisters in Crime."

"I understand all that. But couldn't I just promise to swim an extra ten minutes at the Y tonight instead?"

"You know that's not an option either — unless you amend your original sign-up sheet by using Form Cue-zee-one-oh-slash-nine. And I should warn you that approval of this form generally takes from nine to fifteen months. When choosing allowed activities and permissable exclusions, you signed up originally for biking, love-making, and skipping that morning doughnut you used to enjoy. Substitution in any of those categories is not condoned."

"But it's just that the lovemaking — "

Dana frowned, then suddenly looked ready to cry. "It's me, specifically, isn't it? I don't match your erotic criteria anymore, do I? It's

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only three extra pounds, you know. And I'm working hard to lose it. Well, the SFWA Bylaws certainly permit you to choose an alternate escort. Just let me get the sample book out of my car — "

I grabbed Dana's wrist as she turned, heedless of her semi-topless state, to go outside and retrieve the book of escorts. "No, Dana, you're as attractive as ever. It's just that sex by the clock and rulebook has turned the whole activity into something of a chore for me. I mean, it seemed like a good idea at the time I first signed up, but now it's often just drudgery."

"Well, certainly it's a chore. It's just one more of your writerly responsibilities, a regular complement to your chosen lifestyle, yet perhaps the most important task — next to the actual writing, of course." She cocked her head querulously and somewhat frightenedly. "You're not advocating a return to the bad old days, are you?"

"Oh, no, of course not!"

"That's good. Otherwise I'd have to report you. And you know the financial penalties for advocating overthrow of SFWA's Physical Fitness Amendment. The organization can't allow matters to retrogress to that horrid state they were in just ten years ago. Why, it's hard to imagine that such conditions ever existed. Writers who were slothful, self-indulgent, shamefully out of shape, and unphotogenic. No wonder science fiction, fantasy and horror writers were regarded as wheezing geeks, spavined mouse-potatoes and cellulite-pocked nebbishes, unable to command their fair share of media attention. They all *were!* That image proved to be the main reason why those genres could never command more than a certain limited slice of market-share. The writers were simply perceived as too unhealthy and unattractive. In competition with Jackie Collins, Paul Auster, Zadie Smith and their ilk, the genre writers just couldn't hold their own in the mediasphere."

I hadn't counted on Dana being such a SFWA flack, or on getting a history lesson from her. But I endured her speech as being preferable to the lovemaking. The clock was already running down on our session.

"The field should have recognized all of this long ago, since they had certain breakout successes such as those hotties Jonathan Lethem and Neil Gaiman. And even the case of hunky Kim Stanley Robinson and his massive sales, while occurring within the genre, pointed the way. But instead everyone truly

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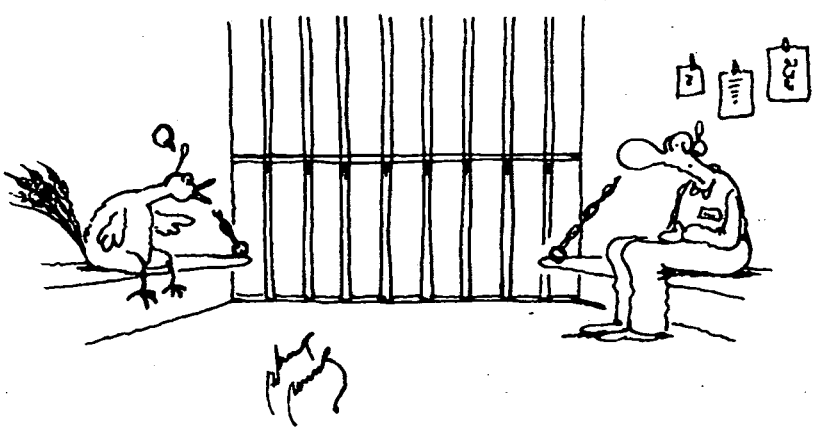
believed that people were actually interested not in Stan's author photos or the thrilling news of his hiking exploits but in reading about stinky old *Mars!* But once the blinders fell away, it was only a short path to a complete reversal of affairs. And now, ten years later, the majority of SFWA's trim, pumped, and buffed members appear regularly on bestseller lists, talk shows, and reality programs. Why, the latest series of *Who Wants to Marry an SF Writer*? was rated number one last month! And this is the paradise on Earth that you and your selfishness are intent on destroying!"

Dana's pretty face had grown flushed during her tirade, and I had to confess that I was finding her more attractive by the minute, recalling previous sessions with her when I had been more in the mood. What had I been thinking? Surely this wasn't too high a price to pay for all my worldly success. And what right did one writer have to compromise the fiscal well-being of his peers?

I ran my fingers up Dana's bare arm. "Okay, baby, you've convinced me. Let's go to the bedroom."

Dana checked her watch. "I'm sorry, but there's not enough time now. I have to be with one of the local Grandmasters in an hour. He's appearing on the cover of *Modern Maturity* and needs me as arm candy. But if you fill out Form Bee-ex-seven-six-four, we can do it twice tomorrow."



"One minute I'm fanning my plumage, and the next thing I know I'm a registered sex offender."

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Rod Garcia's wonderful fantasy tales of Markovy (of which "The Bone Witch" in our last February issue was the most recent) continue to delight both fans and critics. His latest adventure might have a forbidding title, but in truth it's one of his most rousing tales yet.

Killer of Children

By R. Garcia y Robertson

Sister Ida

HELENA WAS THE BRAVEST person Natasha ever knew, the most joyous and most alive, and now Helena was dead. Natasha could barely believe it, sitting on the stone floor of her tiny nun's cell, her head in her hands, short black hair showing between her white fingers, her bony elbows resting on bent knees. Having given up her habit, Natasha sat in her linen shift, shivering from cold and dread — for right now men were deciding how she too should die — though somehow the enormity of a world without Helena eclipsed even her own doom.

Natasha's life was so entwined with Helena's that since Helena had died, it seemed totally natural she should die too. For most of Natasha's fifteen years, Helena had been her life and hope, the spark lighting her way; with Helena she had always been among the chosen élite, living in the eye of the storm. Helena had raised her to the heights of excitement, awakening her to love, music, dance, religion, adventure, jealousy, and

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now nauseating despair; first as playmates and best friends, then as mistress and maidservant, then lady and confessor, and finally murderess and accomplice. And ever since age twelve they had been illicit lovers as well, a secret shared only with God.

Now the secret was out and Helena was dead, brave willful Helena D'Hay, with her honey-gold hair and wild mocking smile, who had been by turns the spoiled brat, the boyar's daughter, then the young lady, and the teenage baroness. D'Brovniks had taken Helena to unconsecrated ground, tied her to a stake, then stoned her to death for adultery and murder. What a sad hideous thought. Natasha had heard the sentence passed, and knew the D'Brovniks would have stoned her alongside Helena, but she was a nun, untouchable without Church permission. Right now, Baron D'Brovnik was hectoring her bishop for the right to carry out the sentence. Natasha prayed the old bishop would hold firm, hoping Mother Church would find a way to kill her. She was already eternally grateful she did not have to see Helena die.

When the lock finally turned, she looked up, relieved to see veiled nuns had come for her, wearing long white habits trailing to the ground. Her heart lifted, happy to be in the hands of nuns, who whispered softly to her from behind the veils, "Be strong, daughter. Be strong and obey."

Hearing herself called "daughter" showed how far Natasha had fallen — no longer a "sister," just an unfortunate in their care. Still, it felt good to walk between cool protective pillars of white cloth that seemed to glide over the polished floors of the great wooden church. When Natasha reached the nave, she shrank back between the nuns, wishing she had never given up her habit and veil and let her hair grow out. Men in blue and black D'Brovnik livery lined the walls, all of them eyeing her, the only figure not hidden in fabric. She kept her eyes downcast, knowing the D'Brovnik retainers were here to see she got a death sentence for aiding Helena's rash, hopeless rebellion. They came armed and ready, fearing the Church might find some absurd reason to spare a defenseless teenage girl who had harmed no one, and merely obeyed her doomed mistress.

Bishop Cyrus was a gaunt, devout man of God dressed in cloth-of-silver and standing before the high altar, holding aloft his silver crosier as a sign for silence. Ignoring the crowd of retainers, clerics, nuns, and

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onlookers that filled the carved and polished cathedral, he asked Natasha, "Daughter, do you understand the charges against you?"

She nodded, well understanding why she was there. "Yes, Father. I do."

"And do you submit to the judgment of Mother Church?" asked old Bishop Cyrus.

She nodded again, saying, "I most faithfully submit." Holy Church could not shed blood, but there were ways around the ban, particularly when secular justice would be much worse. Fasting to death was a woman's favorite, a serene contemplative end, especially compared to being flogged barefoot through the streets to a burning stake. But whatever Mother Church devised for her was vastly better than being handed over to Helena's killers.

"Our judgment is that you must be reduced from nun to novice, and your penance shall be to present yourself as the summer offering at Karadyevachka, the Shrine of the Black Maiden in Nordling."

Natasha had heard all the scary childhood stories of upcountry Old Rite shrines that still performed virgin sacrifices. Dark grim temples to Death, where young girls were done away with in secret. Helena had a mania for such tales, swearing they were true — now Natasha would find out. Nuns whispered, "Be brave. Submit to His Holiness." Not trusting her voice, Natasha nodded silently.

Bishop Cyrus softened, saying, "Do you know you will be giving yourself up to Heaven?"

That was for the D'Brovniks, so they would see she went knowingly to her doom. Nuns nudged her, and Natasha answered as loud as she could, "I do."

Baron D'Brovnik himself was there to hear her say it, a big, murderous, crafty-eyed boyar with speckled gray in his beard, wearing half-armor even in a house of God. Sneaking a look out the corner of her eye, she saw Helena's stern father-in-law was vastly irritated at her getting off so easily, sentenced to some vague far-off death in a northern shrine. D'Brovniks had ruled the lands within the bend in the Brovva longer than anyone could remember, and the baron could barely believe the Church was coddling a rebel just because she was a nun. He ached to see her broken by his own hand — anything less was a compromise with Mother Church. He

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clearly wished he could just call in the three mutes of the bowstring, and see her strangled on the spot.

After pronouncing formal sentence, Bishop Cyrus blessed her for being brave. Natasha did not feel brave at all, being wretchedly frightened, but she gladly accepted the bishop's blessing, sure she would need it. Nuns stepped up to take her away, surrounding her with quiet swishing fabric. As they led her off, Natasha was startled to see the men's bearded faces had changed completely. When she was led in they were smirking, enjoying the sight of a fallen nun, barefoot in a smock with her hair growing out. Now their scorn and contempt had turned to pity — all they saw was a small teenage girl being led away to a dark mysterious end, a death so secret it could only be imagined.

Which felt strange, since Natasha was delighted with how things had gone, happy to be back in the care of nuns. If she had to be done to death, how much better that it be done at a later date, and in far-off Nordling, rather than here and now at these men's hands. But men feared most what they could not see.

In fact, Natasha enjoyed a newfound serenity knowing her doom was moved to Nordling. Before coming to live here in Brovazamak, she had never been more than twenty miles from home in her whole life. Now they could not kill her until they got her to Nordling; she had the Holy Church's word on that. Being slated for sacrifice meant that for the first time in her life no man — not even Baron D'Brovnik — could hurt her, not without striking a blow against Heaven. Miraculous indeed. Clasping her hands, she took a moment to silently thank the Almighty.

Life slipped into a strange sort of suspension, without Helena to give it turmoil and direction, telling her which rules to live by and which to break. Not even a nun anymore, Natasha no longer had prayers and chores to occupy her. Travel became her main distraction, since her last and longest journey began at once, and it would be her one and only look at the wide world. Bishop Cyrus saw her off, sending her up the Brovva in a bullock-car, a little wooden bedroom on wheels, which she shared with a kindly young nun from Nordling named Sister Ida. The bullock driver and his boy rode on the roof, and they were escorted by three "lances" from Baron D'Brovnik's household cavalry, each lance consisting of a man-at-arms, squire, and two mounted bowmen, making a dozen armed riders, all

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ordered to see she got to the Shrine of the Black Maiden in Nordling before the first day of summer.

Winding through flat steppe north and east of the capital, the Brovva watered the heart of Markovy, fertile black earth grainlands dotted with tiny hamlets and onion-domed churches. Here in central Markovy, tall luxuriant feather-grass had grown for untold millennia, storing nutrients in its matted roots, leaving deep black layers of humus so rich and thick that it was carted away for fertilizer on less fortunate plots. Serfs in the vast open fields touched their brows and bowed when they saw the curtained bullock wagon with its clattering escort of armed riders, while inside, Natasha and Sister Ida lived in unaccustomed comfort, reclining on cushions or the single bed, and cooking their meals on the small iron stove. Sister Ida was a prim pinch-faced nun from Nordling in her mid-twenties who said her prayers religiously. Otherwise they had no schedule to keep and no one watching over them, leaving them free to talk, and loll, and watch flat countryside roll past, broken only by tall trees along the river.

Sister Ida turned out to be pious and sympathetic, from a landholding serf family like Natasha's. Ida's father thought her too plain for marriage, and put her in a nunnery instead. "Best thing that could have happened to me," Ida declared, crossing herself enthusiastically. "Our Almighty's hand at work."

Natasha thought of how Helena had talked her into becoming a nun, making it seem like her holy duty. Too bad the habit did not take. That first night, camped by the riverbank in their little traveling room, Natasha could not sleep, haunted by images of what might happen to her, everything from suttee to ritual strangulation. Finally she got up the courage to ask Ida, "What do you know about the shrine at Karadyevachka?"

Heaving a sigh, Ida said a silent prayer, then opened a jar of plum wine, poured a healthy jolt into a wooden cup. As nuns, they naturally shared utensils, thinking it sinful to use two cups when one would do. Secure in their lamp-lit traveling room on a warm May night, Ida had taken off her veil and habit; sitting in a linen shift, with the wooden cup in her hands, her head and eyebrows shaved, she looked more like a starved Buddha than a young woman in her twenties. Natasha was wearing a silk slip that had belonged to Helena. "I have never been there," Sister Ida admitted,

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solemnly handing Natasha the cup, "but girls do go there. Not every year, but they do go."

Natasha took a deep swallow of plum wine to steady herself, finding it sweet and heady. "And do not come back?"

Pouring more plum wine into the cup, Sister Ida stroked Natasha's cheek, saying quietly, "Take another drink."

Surprised by the nun's touch, Natasha obeyed, asking suspiciously, "Are you getting me drunk?"

"Yes." Sister Ida smiled good-naturedly. "It is part of the Old Rite. Some things are not meant to be heard sober."

Taking another swallow, Natasha thought of the girls who had gone before her, each getting drunk before she learned her fate. "Did you know any of them?"

"Some." Sister Ida's smile vanished, and she took a sip herself, staring sadly into the carved wooden cup.

"Who were they?" Natasha asked, already feeling like one of them. "What were they like?"

"Most had no choice." Sister Ida handed the cup back, resting her hand on Natasha's knee. "Babies born badly deformed are offered to the shrine. And my best friend's little sister Katelyn was stricken with a wasting disease. When it was sure she would die, she offered herself at the shrine, not wanting her family to see her suffer. My last memory of Katelyn is her turning to wave to us before hobbling off, headed for the shrine, proud to have something to do with her lost life. Sometimes strangers from afar would offer themselves, infanticides, suicides, and the like. One spring I remember an older girl with a refined Markov accent coming to our home, politely asking my mother directions to the shrine, then thanking us and going on, without any word of explanation."

Thankful for the plum wine, Natasha took a deep swallow, drinking to that unknown city girl. "What happened to them?"

"No one knows." Sister Ida shook her head, saying, "The secret name for the Black Maiden of Karadyevachka is the Killer of Children. Since the shrine is set against a high crag, some say the girls are taken to the top and thrown off. Or devoured there by wild rocs."

Some choice. Taking a swig, Natasha told her, "I know which I would pick."

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"At least you will not drown." Sister Ida patted Natasha's knee, then poured more plum wine in the cup, asking gently, "Why are you offering yourself?"

Wine had gone to her head, making Natasha unsure what to say. "Love, I guess. And fear of what the D'Brovniks would do to me."

"But what was your crime?" Sister Ida asked, giving her hand a comforting squeeze.

"Love, too," Natasha laughed ruefully, "and willful disobedience."

Sister Ida looked at her askance. "What sort of love?"

"The wrong sort," Natasha acknowledged, embarrassed by how perverted her love life would sound.

Sister Ida smiled and tushed her, saying, "Is there any other kind?"

How true. Emboldened by the plum wine, Natasha told her sordid story. "When I was a maidservant, I fell in love with my mistress, Lady Helena D'Hay, sister to Lord Valad D'Hay. It was not hard, Helena was insanely beautiful, and we had been best friends since girlhood. But most of all Helena wanted it, and whatever Helena wanted, Helena got. It was wonderful at first, our secret paradise, a soft loving sanctuary from the world. Then the world came crashing in, and Helena was given in marriage as a peace offering to Baron D'Loy, the son and heir of Baron D'Brovnik. When she first got the news, Helena wanted us to run away together disguised as gypsies, but then she got the brilliant notion of making me a nun, and her confessor."

"So you became her lover and her confessor." Sister Ida nodded her approval. "Incredibly convenient."

Sort of. "Helena insisted on making true confession, not wanting to lie to the Almighty, and I always gave her kisses for penance, so it worked out well all around. Some confessions got to be real giggle fests — but hearing every wayward thought Helena had, and the lurid details of every sin committed by your beloved does get tiring."

"I do not doubt it," Sister Ida agreed with her, though no true nun could know the half of it. Shameless and unrestrained, Helena once knelt down and performed an indecent oral act on a surprised and embarrassed stable boy, before strolling off to kiss her hated husband good-bye.

"But the world would never just let us be," Natasha complained, tears welling up, angry and amazed at how casually her life was destroyed.

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"Helena was a peace offering from the D'Hays, and the peace did not hold. War broke out between D'Brovniks and D'Hays, and Helena became the enemy, demoted in the family and snubbed by her in-laws who maneuvered to annul the marriage. When she protested, her husband beat her and took a mistress. So Helena said fine, and annulled the marriage on the spot, pointing out they forced her to wed in the first place."

Natasha shuddered at that ghastly scene, and at the whipping Helena got for it — Markovite marriages were solemnized by the bride kissing her husband's dog whip as a sign of submission. Afterward Natasha had put salve on the welts, terrified by the hurt they had done to her love's smooth white body, fearing what would come next. Even alone and unarmed in the enemy camp Helena would not give in. "Helena swore she would never be raped, and when her husband did it, she fought back and killed him, using the knife he had held at her throat. She came to me with bruises on her face and blood on her hands — then we did run, disguised as a modest veiled merchant's wife and her eunuch groom." Natasha wiped her eyes and smiled, saying, "I got to play the eunuch, and did rather well."

Ida applauded and poured more plum wine. "You must have made a magnificent eunuch."

"I thought so." Natasha bobbed her head in a drunken bow. "But we were caught, and the last time I saw Helena was at her sentencing. When they announced she would be stoned to death, Helena blew me a kiss." At that Natasha broke down and cried big huge sobs, missing her friend horribly, glad that the Church was taking her to die.

Sister Ida put an arm around her, drawing Natasha to her, saying, "Yet you are still alive."

"Temporarily." Natasha tried to stifle her sobs.

"As are we all," Sister Ida reminded her, using the silk hem of Helena's slip to dry Natasha's tears. "And in the time you have left, you must separate what is you and what is Helena, and celebrate what is you. For there is much to celebrate. You are brave, and loyal, and honest, and loving."

With each attribute Sister Ida wiped away another tear, ending with a flourish, "...and very pretty as well." Leaning forward, Sister Ida kissed her long and tenderly on the lips. Ida's mouth tasted cool and wet, and a little like plum wine. Drunk as she was, Natasha had seen this coming,

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but had already decided to kiss back — if this was her last journey, she did not want to spend it alone, pining for Helena. Though Natasha was not at all attracted to Sister Ida, the nun clearly wanted this, and had been marvelously kind and understanding, lifting her spirits immensely. Which certainly merited a kiss.

When their lips parted, Sister Ida looked into her eyes, saying contritely, "I cannot save you."

"I know. I do not expect you to." Natasha's problem was not salvation, but the nun's body, which was firm and lean and not the least like Helena. With Helena it had been all soft warm curves and clouds of golden hair, but Ida's older harder body and shaven head seemed more like how a man might feel — though Natasha had never been with a man, making it hard to judge. Natasha had never been with anyone but Helena. But right now Sister Ida's firm hand on her bare hip felt good, and Natasha ached to open herself to life, to feel new things, and another's touch, even if it was only for a while. All she said was, "I have never made love to a nun before."

"It is not that hard," Sister Ida whispered, shedding her scratchy nun's shift, revealing a reassuringly female body. Sliding a hand inside Natasha's silk slip, Sister Ida's fingers followed the curve of flesh, finding the hollow between Natasha's thighs. Sister Ida whispered, "Here, I will show you how." And she did.

WAKING TO THE GENTLE SWAY of the wagon, amid sunlight falling through the small glass windows, Natasha felt warm and hungover. They were moving, headed up the Brovva toward Nordling. From her bed she could see riverbank rolling past, shining green treetops set against the bluest sky ever, full of spring songbirds trilling to the new day. Lying tangled in the nude body of the nun, Natasha knew she was seeing a whole new world as well.

How new was apparent when they stopped to water the oxen, and she put on a dress to pee. As she squatted by the wagon, a squire came up, asking if she wanted water from the river. This question nearly floored Natasha, who had never had a man draw water for her, much less a boyar's squire. Flustered, she nodded her head, and he trotted off to oblige. Then a Kazak bowman came up, offering her hot tea, followed by a groom with

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biscuits. In no time the squire was back with a bucket of water, and soap to go with it, scented soap, smelling of lavender. Sitting by the wagon, nibbling her biscuits and sipping tea, she had a steady trickle of men come up to do her favors, or just to watch her eat. Far from treating her as a criminal, the men were caught up in the drama of her sacrifice; everything she did seemed to touch them deeply, no matter how simple or ordinary. She found she could walk freely among these strange armed men, drawing nothing but shy smiles, like she was a little sister, or a secret sweetheart. No lewd come-ons, no attempts to fondle her, nor drag her into the brush, just ready helpfulness that would rapidly turn to lust — but only if she let it. Utterly amazing.

And she could have whatever she wanted. Natasha had meant to bathe in the river, but when she asked instead for hot water, men stumbled over each other to obey. Sister Ida brought out a wooden tub and Natasha had a glorious hot bath in the spring air. Squires and bowmen applauded when she doffed her dress and slip, then they lined up to lift heavy buckets, pouring heated water over her while she washed. Standing under the warm cascade, rubbing herself with scented soap, she felt her hangover magically melt away before the men's admiring eyes. Born a serf, Natasha had been bathing in front of men since she was a little girl, but all the time she was with Helena, men's gaze seemed to pass right over her; now it was her turn to be looked at, and applauded, and vainly lusted after. These men would have gotten the same show if she had bathed in the river, only they would never have thought to work for it, nor even to applaud.

So it went, all the way up the Brovva. Each morning she awoke to another new world, another vast landscape that she would never see again. Black earth steppe stretched in all directions, grainfields so immense it barely felt like the wagon was moving. Twice, walled towns loomed in the distance, but each time they passed them by, headed for the highlands of Nordling. Finally, after days of travel, endless flats turned to rolling hill country carved by ancient glaciers, a low undulating landscape of marshy hollows, moraine ridges, and shallow lakes. Tiny islands of forest appeared, the first signs of the great sea of trees lying to the north and east.

And each night she slept with Sister Ida. Men at morning wash paid scant attention to the nun in her habit and veil, but at night Ida became the ugly duckling who got to sleep with the swan. And Natasha was now

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the swan, bright and doomed like Helena had been — while Sister Ida was the one in love. But being the swan was not nearly the same thing as being with one. Natasha had slept with Helena out of blind overwhelming love for the most beautiful thing in her world, but she slept with Sister Ida out of fear and loneliness, craving shelter from men's dangerous admiration. Was that how Helena had felt about her? Maybe. Though in other ways she was wildly different from Helena. One night she told Sister Ida, "It seems strange to die, never having been with a man."

"Why? I have never been with a man." Sister Ida raised the cup of plum wine in gratitude. "Thank Heaven, I was not pretty enough."

"You are a nun," Natasha pointed out, "you are expected not to." Being a fallen nun but still never knowing a man seemed fundamentally unfair.

Sister Ida shrugged. "It is supposed to be a virgin sacrifice, but why stand blindly on tradition? Get one of them alone — whichever you fancy — you see how they look at you. Then you can tell me what it is like, but do it soon, for we are nearing the borders of Nordling."

Dire news. Nonetheless Natasha hesitated, though she certainly had nothing to save herself for. Something Helena would never have done. Closing her eyes, Natasha could picture Helena's big blonde smile as she happily took her pick. Three lances of household cavalry had small chance of ever sacrificing Helena — two days down the road, and she would have had the lot of them marching off to make her Queen of the Balts. Which was why the D'Brovniks had to stone her to death.

Next morning Natasha had an unexpected reminder of D'Brovnik power, seeing the last D'Hay stronghold on the Brovva, Hebektahay Castle, the Bride of the D'Hays, being beset by the baron's troops. Sited on a high outcropping above the far bank of the Brovva, Hebektahay was virtually impregnable with three fortified wards ringing an inner keep, and further defended by a big bend in the river. D'Brovniks had taken the town and outworks, isolating the castle, then brought up catapults, trebuchets, and ballista, erecting a huge earth platform on the single landward side, to fire down into the outer ward. At the same time, miners brought by boats tunneled into the riverbank, trying to bring down one of the middle ward towers. Miserable serf families, turned out of the castle to conserve rations, pleaded for food from passing boats. D'Brovniks

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would not let them through the lines, hoping the castle would take them back, reducing the defender's larder. Destitute mothers knelt by the riverbank, holding up starving babies, begging the boatmen to take them.

Two days later, they reached the final ford on the Brovva, and Sister Ida nodded at the dark wooded uplands across the river, saying, "That is Nordling."

Looking over the broad brown river, Natasha saw the land of her doom, the ancient homeland of the Markovites, boreal hills that sheltered her people until they were brave enough to come down onto the plains, driving off the Kazaks and Kipchaks, then pushing back the Poles and Balts, claiming the rich black earth as their own. On the far side, hamlets got fewer and farther apart, separated by high ridgelines and forest belts — but the people got friendlier. At their first stop in Nordling, women and children met the wagon, offering her flowers and the first fruits of spring. When Natasha took the food and flowers, people cheered, and she asked Sister Ida why. "Because you have offered yourself," the nun replied. "For the children."

"For the children?" Pleased but bemused, Natasha clutched the flowers and smiled to the crowd.

"These are simple folks," Sister Ida explained. "To them the Black Maiden is a protector of children, and Karadyevachka is her shrine. Girls hereabouts who give themselves to the shrine, do it to help keep children from harm — so they assume you are doing the same. It is a harmless folk heresy tolerated by the Church."

Natasha saw shy loving gratitude in people's faces, knowing she was giving her life for them and their children, while they had only these poor offerings in return. This shy, worshipful look got stronger the deeper they went into Nordling. Mothers brought her smiling toddlers to bless, and babies to kiss, calling out blessings to her in return. Little girls solemnly offered her their rag dolls, which she kissed but did not keep.

Having everyone always happy to see her, giving her little greeting gifts and showing every concern for her comfort, became like a narcotic. Hugs, kisses, and heartfelt tears of good-bye lifted Natasha's spirits, making her feel she really was special, destined for some grand mysterious purpose. These joyful, solicitous hillfolk certainly thought so. They would have gladly let her have whatever she wanted — except to turn back.

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Karadyevachka Shrine sat at the base of a tall wooded crag, a black-timbered hall built in typical Markovite fashion with low eaves and carved doorposts, set right up against the hill, blending into the ground and shaded by aged oaks. Veiled nuns filed out of the shrine to meet them, singing as they came, carrying a caged pigeon and a big two-handed silver cup. When Natasha stepped out of the wagon door in her white sacrifical gown to greet the singing nuns, flower-decked squires and bowmen went down on their knees, crying and kissing her hand. These former D'Brovnik retainers had by now become her honor guard, fiercely loyal and heartbroken to lose her.

Seeing the dark shrine waiting for her sobered Natasha up, but there was a ready remedy for that. Ending their song, the nuns from the shrine held out the cool silver cup they carried, telling her to drink. Natasha did, finding it was sweet fruit wine, sugared so children would like it. She realized these were her last sober moments — the nuns meant to get her drunk, just like Sister Ida did that first night in the wagon. Old Rite ritual really did call for it. Saying a silent prayer for the girls who came before her, Natasha drank deeply.

Giving her the caged pigeon, the nuns told her to set it free; which she did, to a chorus of cheers. Happy to be free of the tiny cage, the pigeon shot off, disappearing over the trees. Good luck, Natasha thought, wishing to heaven she could fly off that easily. Having wisely said their good-byes in the wagon, she and Sister Ida exchanged a chaste kiss, though tears were pouring down the nun's cheek. Already tipsy, Natasha told the nun not to fret. "I am feeling fine, really."

But Sister Ida had fallen hopelessly in love with her charge and had a hard time letting go. Looking toward the oak-shaded shrine, Natasha too had second thoughts, suggesting, "More wine?"

Sister Ida brought her the cup, and held it while she drank. Feeling the wine go to her head, Natasha signaled when she had enough to send her on her way. By now she knew she had to make the walk to the shrine alone — everyone expected it. Her throat tightened, and unable to speak, she nodded good-bye to the world.

Feeling both frightened and giddy, she set out silently up the path toward the dark shrine, drunken feet starting to drag. These were the last steps in her long journey, and in her life as well. How sad and strange,

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coming all this way and making all these new friends, only to die at the end — but none of these friendly worshipful folks were giving her any choice. She thought of Helena blowing her a good-bye kiss, and all the girls who had walked this path before her, trying to draw courage from their sacrifice.

Built from ancient oiled timbers, stained black by time, Karadyevachka Shrine had a fancifully carved front with fiery salamanders climbing the door posts, trying to catch brightly colored birds. Carved trolls looked out from under black eaves, guarding the blue-painted door. Natasha did not have to be drunk to feel like she had stepped into a weird fairy story from her girlhood — a scary one, for inside lived the Killer of Children. Turning at the painted door, framed by the carved troll faces, she waved to the armed men and nuns, blowing them a kiss.

Folks cheered, and she went in, leaving the daylight behind. Darkness enveloped her, warm, wet, and smelling of sulfur, filled with the sound of water dripping on stone. Unable to see, she felt blind panic rising inside her, remembered Sister Ida saying, "At least you will not drown." Natasha did not want to die gasping for breath with stinking sulfur water filling her face and nose; that hardly seemed fair.

Slowly her eyes adjusted to the dim light falling through the shrine's smokehole, and she saw that Karadyevachka Shrine was built over a natural hot spring. Big rocks sat at odd angles embedded in the dirt floor, surrounding a warm simmering pool that smelled of brimstone. Seated on one of the rocks was an incredibly old woman with tangled white hair and a wrinkled toothless face. Lifting blind eyes, the old woman reached out a withered hand, whispering, "Come here girl. Do not be afraid."

Natasha obeyed, walking over and taking the crone's hand, wondering what would come next; up close, she could see that below the sightless eyes, the old woman had parchment-thin skin stretched over fine beautiful bones. When young she must have been lovelier than Helena. Feeling Natasha's face, the woman asked gently, "What is your name?"

"Natasha." She stood still, listening to water lap on stone, letting the blind old woman feel her.

"How old are you?" asked the crone.

"Fifteen, I suppose." As she was a serf, no one had kept accurate track of her birth date, least of all Natasha.

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"You are a brave girl," the old woman informed her. "I feel it in your face. Do not worry, here you will just be purified. Have you been with a man, or ever shed innocent blood?"

Saying no to both, Natasha told enough of Helena's story to explain how she got here. The crone asked if helping Helena flee did not make her an accomplice. "Only in self-defense," Natasha insisted, standing up for Helena. "Helena was attacked at knife point, and choked into submission, waking up with him atop her and the knife stuck in the floorboards beside her head. She grabbed it before he could, or it would have been used on her."

"Enough." The blind crone held up her hand. "I see well why they sent you here. Purify yourself in the pool."

Natasha stripped and bathed in the warm volcanic water, and when she was done and dressed, the old woman had a goblet of wine waiting. Handing her the goblet, she told Natasha, "Drink. We both sit on the brink of death — but you must face it today."

Taking a sip, Natasha whispered, "What will happen to me?"

"We will walk together to the top of the crag," the crone explained, "where I will leave you to await the Destroyer."

Natasha took a hurried gulp, asking, "What destroyer?"

Laying a hand on Natasha's head, the blind woman ran frail fingers through the girl's short black hair. "Be brave, my sweet. Though I have served this shrine for seventy years, I do not know what form the Killer of Children takes."

No longer as drunk as she wanted to be, Natasha took another great gulp. "Will I see Helena?"

"I do not know that either," the ancient priestess admitted. "There is much about death we do not know, even when we sit at her door. Come, you can bring the cup."

With that the old woman led her out the back of the dark shrine across a green-banked stream, and up the dusty path to the peak, a dizzying climb for a drunk girl and a blind crone. Natasha saw huge swaths of Nordling through gaps in the trees, green forested hills cut by swift streams, with cottony clouds towering overhead. Halfway up, Natasha finished off the wine. And a little farther along, she lost the goblet, but the old woman told her not to worry. So Natasha did not, having other things on her mind.

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Near the top it struck her that she was still a virgin, a strange thought, but somehow apropos. Damn, she had meant to do something about that. It certainly could not be helped now — one of life's great mysteries was just going to remain one. Coming on a wide flat spot ending in a sheer drop, the old woman stopped, saying, "Here."

"Here?" Natasha looked around, realizing this high grassy meadow was the last place she would ever see.

"Yes," the aged priestess replied, giving her a withered kiss. "Say hello to Death for me, for I shall be seeing her soon." Turning away, the crone tottered back down the trail, feeling her way with a stick. Leaving Natasha drunk and alone near the edge of the cliff, taking a last bleary look at the world.

Edging up to the drop, she glanced down, teetering alarmingly, seeing straight down to the steppe. If she did not like the look of this Killer of Children, she could always jump. Backing away carefully, she sat down on the grass, scared and lonely, wishing she had more wine to drink. Wishing even more she had Helena with her. Why did she have to face this alone? Because Helena had already endured far worse — that was why.

As she sat worrying, a shadow swept over her. Natasha froze. Whatever made the shadow had to be huge. Looking up, she saw a giant female roc circling overhead. Killer of Children? This monster roc could hunt tigers, with its needle-sharp talons and terrible curved beak. All her carefully hoarded courage evaporated. Drunk or sober, she did not want to be ripped to pieces by a gigantic bird of prey.

Staggering to her feet, she tried to make for the cliff, aiming to launch herself into space, preferring the stones below to being pecked apart by a huge bird. But the great bird was too quick, dropping down to land in a thundering flutter of wings, cutting her off from the edge. Shrinking back, Natasha stared up at the giant raptor, petrified by its cruel curved beak.

Up close she saw the twelve-foot-tall roc wore a leather hood, with silk reins running to a saddle on the bird's back. Sitting in the saddle was a blonde young woman with a beautiful face, wearing embroidered silk pants and a light leather flying jacket. Across her back was a silver moonbow, and a quiver full of colorfully feathered arrows. Venom rings flashed in the sunlight on her slim fingers, giving her the touch of death. Looking

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levelly at Natasha, the young woman told her, "I am the Destroyer, Persephone, Killer of Children. Who are you?"

Persephone

"NATASHA," SHE REPLIED meekly, amazed by the form the Killer of Children had taken. Persephone was a fearful presence, with her silver moon-bow, bird of prey, and flashing venom rings, but she was also a young woman, not much older than Natasha, with a lovely serene face and alert blue eyes. That contrast was startling in Natasha's drunken state, and all she could think to ask was a trite and direct, "Have you come here to kill me?"

Persephone's lips curved up in a slight smile. "Did you come here to die?"

"Yes," Natasha admitted, though she was not a fanatic about it, adding, "but I desperately want to live."

Persephone's smile widened, and she asked, "Then what are you doing here?"

What indeed? Drunk as she was, Natasha had no ready answer. What was she doing in this far-off corner of Nordling, where she had never been before, talking to a scary blonde woman on a giant bird? That did not even make sense sober. "I am not sure."

Cocking an eyebrow, Persephone asked, "Then you are not a jumper?"

"A jumper?" Natasha looked nonplussed.

Persephone nodded at the drop behind her. "You were headed for the cliff when I landed."

"Only because your bird frightened me," Natasha explained brightly — it still did, but not as much.

"Seems a thin excuse to commit suicide," Persephone sniffed. "You must have more reason than that. Are you perhaps fatally diseased? Or in intolerable pain?"

Natasha was not feeling the least pain. "No, I am pretty happily drunk on fruit wine."

"All the more reason to live," Persephone laughed. "So why are you here?"

Natasha told her story, or the highlights at least; Helena's marriage

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from hell, and becoming a nun, then a fugitive, a eunuch, and finally a prisoner, her choice of stoning or sacrifice, her long trip here (minus sleeping with Sister Ida), and her brief inebriated stay at the shrine — proud that she could get the story out in her present state. "And you loved this Helena?" Persephone asked, eyeing her carefully.

"With all my heart." It felt good to say it. Her love for Helena always had to be a deep secret, and the whole time they were together Natasha had never told a soul — not even when they beat and starved her. Now she could proclaim it to the world from atop this crag above the steppe, loud as she wanted, in the face of Death herself. "Helena was my truest friend, and my dearest love, and I miss her mightily."

Persephone smiled at her enthusiasm. "Well, can you live without her?"

"If I have to, I suppose." It was not Natasha's first choice, though if she must, she must. It seemed horribly unfair to finally proclaim her love, then have to give it up.

"Get on behind me," Persephone told her, nodding toward the back of her saddle.

"What?" Natasha stared at Persephone's high perch, hardly believing what she was hearing.

"It is that or go over the edge." Persephone indicated the drop behind her.

"But I will never be able to get up there." Besides she was afraid of the bird, but too scared to say so.

"Then choose the cliff," Persephone suggested. "Death is easy, life is difficult."

And then some. Natasha gingerly stepped up to the giant bird, grabbing the rear of the saddle. Why did she have to be drunk for this? Regretting each time she greedily begged more wine, Natasha cleared her head with a deep breath, then hoisted herself aboard the bird. Unbelievable. When she first saw this giant bird, not in her most drunken imagining did she think to end up on its back. She did not have much of a seat, a small pad on the back of the saddle, with her bent knees resting on Persephone's hips, her arms went around the Killer of Children's waist. Close contact ended any doubts about Persephone being real, or anything but what she seemed, a young woman in harem pants, not much older nor bigger than Natasha. What else she was, Heaven only knew.

Leaning forward, Persephone urged the bird into the air.

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Spreading her wings, the roc obeyed, launching them off the cliff edge in a gut-wrenching dive to gain speed, then soaring outward, catching a thermal off a dark patch of fallow, spiraling upward. Natasha got a dizzying view of Nordling spread out below her, a big green-brown blanket of rumpled hills and patchwork fields, cut by shining loops of river. Hawks circled below them, hunting for mice on the fallow. Natasha wondered if she were headed for the Land Beyond, without the messy business of dying — assuming she did not slip and spatter herself on the steppe. Summoning up her courage, she asked Persephone, "Where are we headed?"

"Home," Persephone replied, and the bird seemed to take it as a command, skimming off along a low ridgeline until she found a new updraft. Circling and rising, the roc climbed atop the thermal, then set out for the next one, headed for the black earth steppe. By coasting from thermal to thermal, the roc carried her double load southward out of Nordling, winging toward the broad flat plain of the Brovva. Ahead of them a black dot hung in the air, far out over the flood plain.

Natasha watched the dot grow in size, become a huge silver gas-filled parasail, with a skyship hanging from it, a sleek ultralight craft pointed like a ship with a big maneuvering fan on each side and a tiny aft cabin topped by a pigeon coop. Black grapples hung from the keel ballast tanks. This was something else out of fairy stories — a skyship sailing along before a steady north wind, headed farther out over the flats. She watched in silent fascination as the roc flew them through the control lines between the ship and the inflated parasail, landing on a tall perch directly amidships. "Back so soon?" asked a cultured male voice below them. "What have you found this time?"

"Help her down and see," Persephone suggested, sliding her roc's hood closed so the bird could rest.

Natasha found herself being plucked from the saddle by a man who had climbed the perch to get her. He was tall and blonde and beautifully built, wearing a white page's uniform with gold hearts on his sleeve. His handsome face looked remarkably like Persephone's, but he was all man and handled her easily, setting her down, but not letting go of her, asking, "Who is this beautiful catch?"

"Be nice, Eros," Persephone warned, swinging down out of her saddle. "She is merely a girl."

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Eros shook his blond locks, laughing, "There is no such thing as 'merely a girl.' Look at her, young and tender, and already drunk — you should have sent me to collect her." Letting go of her arms, he bowed, saying, "I am Eros, God of Love. Welcome aboard the *Selene*. What is my lovely maid's name?"

"Natasha," she replied shyly, still not sure on her feet, and glad to have this friendly handsome God of Love ready to grab her — if needed. Eros was easily the most impressive man to show even casual interest in her, polite, affable, and eager to put a smile on her face. "Delighted to meet you too."

Persephone took her by the arm, saying, "He is but a demi-god, and much too busy running this ship. Come, I will show you our quarters." Guiding her to the aft cabin, the Killer of Children pulled back a paper door, revealing a light airy room with cushioned window seats along each wall, and a curtained garderobe in the rear. Two caged pigeons stared back at her from behind tiny wooden bars. Seating her on a cushion, Persephone apologized, "Sorry about Eros, but he is all boy, as well as a semi-divine. Still, he has his uses, and he is a cousin, my mother's sister's son."

"Are you human?" Natasha asked, sitting down on a low cushion, since the skyship's little cabin hardly had headroom.

"Very much so," Persephone assured her, sounding proud of the fact. "The Killer of Children has to be human. Who else would do it?"

"What does it mean to be the Killer of Children?" This question had been hanging over her, unspoken but always there.

"Watch and you will see," Persephone suggested. "For now, it is enough that you are mine. You gave yourself to me, and you owe me your life. In return, I will have need of you."

"For what?" Natasha whispered, not sure she wanted to know.

Persephone studied her intently, weighing how much to tell, finally saying, "Nothing dishonorable nor deadly — I will do those things. Though it will certainly be difficult and dangerous. Life, as I said, is like that."

Taking out a stylus, Persephone made a few marks on a little strip of paper, then rolled the paper into a tiny tube. Opening the pigeon cage, she took out a bird, slipped the tube onto its leg, then released it out a window, watching the pigeon wing away. Natasha remembered the bird she

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released when she arrived at the shrine. One mystery was solved — she saw how the Killer of Children knew to come for her. So much of magic is merely misdirection. Persephone smiled at her look of drunken recognition, saying, "Do make yourself comfortable. Play with Eros if you like, but only when you are sober — being a demi-god he has no morals, and will happily get you pregnant. And please, please do not leap or fall overboard, at least until I am done with you. Any questions?"

Only a million or so, but she was too drunk to frame them. Looking about the neat little cabin, with its wicker floor and cushioned window seats, she asked, "Do all girls from the shrine come here?"

"No," Persephone shook her blonde head, opened a potion ring and poured the white powder into a cup, then added amber liquid from a silver flask. "Each girl has her own story and goes her own way; yours is to come here."

"Why make people think they will die?" After what she had gone through, that seemed incredibly cruel.

"To see I get the girls everyone else has given up on," Persephone explained, closing the potion ring, then jiggling the cup to mix the powder with the liquid. "And many do die — the base of that cliff is littered with small bones. Your case does not seem nearly so hopeless." Persephone handed her the cup, saying, "Here, drink this, it will put you to sleep."

Natasha took it and drank without a qualm, finding it was sweet fruit nectar. Persephone might surely poison her, but she doubted the Killer of Children would stoop to lying about it. In seconds she was sleeping soundly.

When she first awoke, it was dark and she was lying on one of the window seats, with a curtain drawn between her and the rest of the cabin. Stars shone through the glass onto her, but there was no feel of movement. Incredible. And she was no longer drunk, not even hungover. Natasha burrowed deeper into the cushions and went back to sleep.

Next time she awoke, daylight filled her little curtained alcove, and she could see the steppe below, cut by shining loops of river. Cautiously sliding back the curtain, she saw breakfast laid out in the cabin, vinegared rice, smoked fish, and boiled pigeon eggs. After eating it all, she went out on deck, finding the skyship just as amazing sober as she did drunk. Persephone stood on the quarterdeck above the cabin, calling out orders

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to the crew forward, who worked the lines to the parasail. With the foot-pedaled maneuvering fans at quarter speed, *Selene* crabbed crosswind, running "heavy" and relying on aerodynamic lift to give direction. To Natasha it was all more magic.

"Rested?" Persephone called down from the quarterdeck. When Natasha nodded, the Killer of Children added, "Fed too, I hope, for I shall have need of you soon."

Somewhat alarming news. Natasha nodded again, trying to look ready. Relaxing at the port rail, she gloried in the feel of flight, watching green woodlands roll beneath the skyship's keel, giving way to brown plowed fields and gleaming water meadows. Lazy loops of river curled and uncurled below, fanning out into silver marshland, full of weedy islands and bulrush channels. Wild ducks and herons rose up to greet them. Running along the river was a ribbon of road, the same one she and Sister Ida had traveled in their bedroom on wheels.

"Landfall ahead," shouted a sailor in the bow. Leaning far over the rail, searching for landmarks, Natasha saw a column of smoke rising over a big bend in the Brovva. At the base of the smoke stood Hebektahay Castle — the Bride of the D'Hays — Helena's clan's last stronghold on the Brovva, ringed by besieging D'Brovniks. It had taken days to wend their way from here to Karadyevachka Shrine by ox-house. Aided by the stiff north wind, *Selene* had covered the same distance in a day and a half.

"Come up," Persephone called to her, "we are going to land." Joining Persephone on the quarterdeck, Natasha found the Killer of Children looking relaxed in her embroidered pants and green leather jacket, standing with her pubic bone pressed hard against the forward quarterdeck rail, feet planted on either side of the keel, testing the balance of the skyship, feeling her way down. Persephone grinned at her, saying, "This is the fun part."

Eros shouted from the amidships rail, "Valkyries to starboard."

Looking to her right, Natasha saw dark-winged shapes spiraling downriver. "More likely vultures," Persephone declared. "Hard to tell at this distance."

"There's a difference?" Eros called back, looking as pretty as the god for whom he was named. Either way, a battle loomed ahead. Natasha watched Eros arm himself; brash, arrogant, though still in his teens, the

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demi-god wore a silver doublet with angel-wing sleeves over green hose, to which Eros added a back-and-breast, and an armored codpiece, just in case. His sallet helm and golden crossbow lay by the rail — even Love went armored into war.

But not Persephone, pressed against the quarterdeck rail, guiding the *Selene* down, her only protection the green leather flying jacket. Nor Natasha, watching the sprawling triple-walled castle rush up toward them. Lines of tents stretched out from the base of the castle rock, covered by a blue haze of cook smoke, closing off the big river bend and bottling in the D'Hays. Closer to the castle rock she could see catapults, tall siege towers, and war kites flying above the fortress. Fireballs arched over the walls, and a large breach had been pounded in the castle's outer bailey. Black flags flew from the besieger's towers, showing the D'Brovniks would give no quarter. Eros called out, "All hands aft. Bring up the bow."

Crew hurried aft, raising the bow. The huge gas-filled skysail overhead tilted back, slowing *Selene*'s fall. Persephone told Eros, "Take the helm," then strode over to her roc sitting on the midship's perch. Picking up a grapple line and mounting her bird, Persephone called to Natasha, "Come with me; those are your people below."

Some few hundred D'Hays in the castle were indeed Natasha's people — though she doubted she knew any personally, this being as close as Natasha had ever come to the Bride of the D'Hays. And those few D'Hays were surrounded by thousands of angry D'Brovniks that Natasha wanted no part of — still she obeyed, climbing up behind Persephone. They took off together, trailing the grapple line, diving for the middle ward of the castle.

D'Brovnik ballistas on the packed earth platform hurled spears up to greet them, great barbed shafts that the roc artfully avoided, setting them down on the onion-domed roof of the Basilica of the Black Virgin in the castle's middle ward. Natasha was inside the walls of Hebektahay Castle, the same doomed keep she had seen from the far side of the river a few days ago, and never thought to see again. Arrows fired from war kites thudded into the roof around her.

Persephone sprang from the saddle, securing her grapple to the roof and signaling the oncoming *Selene*. War kites parted above them, unwilling to face the careening skyship coming in to land. Losing headway,

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Selene slewed about into the wind, and the line went taut as the windlass worked. Eros ordered the ground lines dropped, and grapples and anchors went over the side, catching on the basilica roof. *Selene* had made landfall without so much as a thump. Mews boys swarmed down a line to see to the roc, carrying clip-fed Cathayan repeating crossbows slung across their backs.

Giving Natasha the saddlebags to carry, Perserphone led her across the dark roof through a forest of carved stone spires to a small door at the base of one of the onion-domes. There Persephone paused to let her catch up, smiling encouragement. Everything Persephone did — be it piloting a skyship, or entering a doomed fortress — was done with a smile, and with an easy swaying grace that came from being at peace with her soul.

Nuns met them in an upper gallery, arrayed behind their Mother Superior, an unveiled stern-faced old nun who could see sin in the crotch of a tree. Her holiness asked frostily, "Why have you come here?"

"Your castle is doomed," Persephone replied, not wanting to give the D'Hays any false hope. "I have come for the children."

"This is our house, and these are our children," declared the aged nun, her wrinkled lips pulled taut, defying a teenaged demi-goddess who could kill her with a touch. "You are not wanted here, with your poisoned weapons and pagan ways."

"Death is hardly ever welcomed," Persephone agreed amiably, "but this is my house too — there was a shrine here to the Dark Maiden centuries before there was ever a basilica or castle. And these children are marked for death, which makes them mine."

Mother Superior stiffened, insisting, "These children are under our protection." Between them lay the incredible chasm between Old Rite and Mother Church, between a girl who embraced death and a crone married to God.

"Tosh," Persephone told her, "you cannot even save yourselves. Have you not seen the black flags outside? When the D'Brovniks come in, everyone not kept for rape or ransom will be put to death, even the little ones. Along with any nun who objects too loudly."

"We are a holy order," the Mother Superior protested grimly. "That is our protection."

Persephone patted Natasha on the shoulder, "Here is the last D'Hay

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nun who resisted the D'Brovniks; she got the choice of being stoned to death, or given to the Killer of Children. I could wait and deal with the D'Brovniks when you are dead — but children here are already dying."

"Why do you think that?" Mother Superior did not deny it.

Persephone smirked, "A bird told me. You know you can neither feed nor protect them — do I deal with you, or the D'Brovniks?"

Mother Superior sighed, saying, "With us." What other choice was there? Nuns led them down to the main floor of the basilica, where homeless women and children huddled amid rich hangings and tall stern icons. Families sheltering in the nave shrank back as the Killer of Children walked among them, a sign of the terror to come. Nor did Natasha inspire much confidence, as the defrocked nun at her side, seeing people cross themselves as she passed. Looking into their frightened faces, Natasha realized she was seeing the living dead. By now she knew the D'Brovniks rather well, and after the expense and loss of a siege they would show no mercy, at least not on the weak and helpless. Starvation, followed by a hideous massacre of the survivors pretty much summed up these people's future. Already terror and hunger had taken its toll, and some faced death with bewildered indifference, others with cringing politeness.

Persephone went patiently from child to child, giving out candied fruit and honey cakes from the saddle bag, which the starved children wolfed down. As she did, Persephone quietly told the mothers she would take any child offered to her. Some mothers were aghast, others gave up their children immediately. To the women and girls who were pregnant, the Killer of Children offered an abortion potion, so they would not be forced to bring more innocent victims into the charnel house that the Bride of the D'Hays had become. Some took it, some did not. By the time they had gone through the entire nave, family by family, Natasha felt numb, drained by the fearful doomed faces. Her own trip to be sacrificed was heaven compared to this, with warm morning baths, Sister Ida at night, plenty to eat, and presents along the way. Her most primal heartfelt reaction was the same as Persephone's — at least get the children out, as many as they could.

Bad as things were in the Basilica of the Black Virgin, things were far worse in the outer ward. Rather than risk her roc, Persephone went on foot, with Natasha right behind her, while Eros stood on the roof of the

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basilica, covering them with his golden crossbow, a beautiful clip-fed double-bow with telescopic sights. People in the middle ward had watched *Selene* land, but were still shocked to see the Killer of Children walking casually among them, with her silver bow and deadly touch. An absolutely abysmal omen. Already people walked only on the landward side of the ward, since trebuchet balls lobbed over the walls came crashing down on the river side, where they had smashed several homes and a brewery into kindling.

Whenever Persephone saw a child she produced a sweet, telling her tale about taking children to safety — just have Mother bring you to the basilica. No one made a move to stop her. Guards at the inner gate hastily ushered them through, lowering the drawbridge between the two baileys. Beyond the bridge, the outer ward was a shambles, breached and burned, overshadowed by the huge mountain of earth the D'Brovniks had erected to let their archers and catapults fire down into the bailey. Head-sized stones came crashing down, more or less at random, and D'Brovnik archers sniped at anyone who moved — being paid by the body. Into this hell were forced the better sort of townsfolk, who could not be just turned out of the castle like serfs. None of them seemed the better sort now, looking starved and scared, living in holes and basements.

Fortunately, most had already had the sense to give their children to the nuns, getting them into the middle ward. But Persephone insisted on combing the smoking rubble in the outer ward, coming up with several orphans and an abandoned baby that Natasha carried. But her mind was on a skinny hollow-eyed boy who stubbornly insisted on staying with his dying mother. She gave him the last of her honey cakes. Back at the Basilica of the Black Virgin, Eros had started a baby-lift, off-loading rice and beans, while taking on talkative children, who asked, "Where are we going?"

"Does that big bird bite?"

"How come my mother cannot come?"

"I am still hungry."

"Yes, let's have more honey cakes."

"Where are they taking us?"

To which Eros patiently answered, "Home. Yes, keep away from her beak. Too old. There are berries and dates waiting in the cabin. Home, I told you."

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Hearing the word "Home" again, Natasha asked, "Where are they going?"

"Somewhere safe." Persephone sounded purposefully vague. "So long as you do not know exactly where, the most hideous torture cannot wring it from you." Cheering thought. Natasha wondered who Persephone's parents were. Who could have mothered the Killer of Children? Persephone must have family, aside from Eros, but all Natasha knew of Old Rite religion came from fairy stories and ghost tales. She always pictured the Killer of Children as a horrible hag with bloody teeth. Grinning broadly, the blonde young demi-goddess asked, "Ready for more?"

"More?" Natasha thought she had misheard her mistress.

"There is still the castle keep, and beyond the walls," Persephone reminded her.

"This is ghastly," she blurted out; after the outer ward, yet another round of carnage seemed too much.

Persephane cocked an inquiring eyebrow. "Did you think it was fun being Killer of Children?"

"No," Natasha had honestly never thought that. Nor had she ever wanted to hear these terrible stories and see people make gut-wrenching choices. "Whyever did you pick me for this?"

"Silly girl," Persephone scoffed at the notion, "I never picked you. You chose me, remember? Death makes do with whatever comes her way."

"Of course." How could she be so foolish? "I could have been tied to a stake and stoned to death instead, or thrown myself off that cliff."

"And what a wise choice this was." Persephone gave Natasha's hand a squeeze, kissing her on the forehead. "For which we are all very thankful."

"Really?" Natasha felt fairly useless, carrying babies and handing out honey cakes to famished children.

"Certainly, have you not seen how Eros looks at you? And the mews boys too. I had to keep a lock on the cabin." Persephone rolled her eyes at all the trouble she had been put to, saying, "Buck up, girl, I will give you a treat. We will see to the castle keep next, saving the worst for last."

Something to look forward to. But she did feel better, knowing she had inadvertently chosen to do good. Should she die from a sniper's arrow or a stray catapult ball, it would literally be "for the children." Like she

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promised the folks in Nordling. And it was nice to be appreciated, even if for the wrong reasons. Following her mistress to where their roc stood waiting, she looked at the mews boys in a new light. Did they really think her cute? One of them certainly was, standing by the roc, smiling broadly, his repeating crossbow held loosely at the end of a long brown arm. Mounting the giant bird, she put her arms around the Killer of Children and they took off, headed for the high stone heart of Hebektahay Castle, the towering keep overlooking the middle and outer wards.

As soon as she alighted in the inner ward, Natasha was in another world, smelling bread baking, and seeing chicken and ducks underfoot. Pigs guzzled milk from the buttery that could have fed babies in the middle ward — but boyars did not eat babies. Liveried servants met them as they landed, a steward and butler greeted them, while a groom and pages attended to the roc, all well-fed and wearing the D'Hay shock-of-wheat badge. Persephone politely accepted the steward's invitation to meet with the Castellan, then turned and knelt, ignoring the men and saying directly to the startled pages. "I assume you are fosterlings, and have no parents here — if so go straight to the Basilica of the Black Virgin. I am taking children out of here."

Before the shocked Steward could stop them, one of the boys asked, "Will we go home to our mothers?"

"Not if you stay here," Persephone promised, then rose and followed the aghast retainers into the main hall to meet with the D'Hays.

All the castle leaders were assembled to greet them, a sign of desperate times — normally a call from the Killer of Children was welcome as spotted pox. Men were in French hose and padded doublets, and sported fashionable velvet cap-hoods and ragged slashed sleeves, while unveiled women wore long Viennese gowns. D'Hays affected western ways, letting their women mix with men, not keeping them veiled and confined. Much to her surprise, Natasha recognized two of Helena's relatives, including Helena's young cousin Alexi, whom Natasha used to babysit. No wonder they had not given up Hebektahay; the boy was the D'Hay male heir, since young Baron Valad D'Hay was unmarried. Alexi was worth a duke's ransom if the D'Brovniks bothered to ransom him, and did not just hold onto the boy, hoping the barony would come to them if dashing young Baron Valad could be made to die childless.

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Hovering over Alexi was his aunt, Lady Constance, merely a Tolstoy married into the family, making twelve-year-old Alexi the ranking noble present. Wearing royal blue trimmed in cloth-of-silver, he stood in sulky silence, with a familiar look of bored masculine condescension doubly alarming in one so young.

Lady Constance D'Hay spoke for him, welcoming them to Hebektahay Castle in the name of her nephew, introducing herself and the Castellan, a blunt, swarthy professional soldier in half-armor. Begging Persephone's help, Lady Constance claimed the D'Brovnik assault was an unprovoked breach of truce, aimed at seizing the heir. Cut off from reinforcement, and facing slow defeat through starvation, Lady D'Hay pleaded, "Will you take my young Lord Alexi to safety with his mother in Markov?"

"You want me to fly him to the capital?" Persephone looked amused, patiently explaining she was not a semi-divine delivery service. "I will take him, but to do with as I see fit."

Lady Constance blanched at the notion of the D'Hay heir being passed about like a serf with a limp, saying, "That is needlessly cruel."

"Cruel?" Persephone looked quizzically back at Lady D'Hay, as if unacquainted with the concept. "Has m'lady seen the black flags outside? To keep Lord Alexi out of D'Brovnik hands, you condemned every serf and servant in this castle to death. Merely giving him up to the D'Brovniks could save scores of children."

"Surely, you would not think of that!" Lady D'Hay's shock turned to horror.

"Think of it? I surely would." Persephone sounded sorely tempted. "Doing it is a different thing — but the decision will be mine and his to make. Who knows? I have seen children give themselves freely to save others from suffering."

"Blasphemous!" Lady D'Hay spat back, finding the notion of the D'Hay heir giving himself up to save starving serfs insultingly obscene.

Persephone smirked. "Still, it is his choice." Stepping closer, the Killer of Children knelt before the surprised boy. Natasha saw men's hands go to their swords, and the Castellan looked to Lady D'Hay — but it was too late; as soon as Persephone got within reach, Alexi's life was in her hands. "I am taking children out of here," she told the D'Hay heir. "You can come with me. I cannot swear I will take you to your mother in

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Markov. But I will not lie, and I will listen to what you say, like I would any boy who offered himself to me."

Demi-goddess and D'Hay heir stared at each other. Lord Alexi said nothing, looking into that intent blonde face, standing close enough to smell the sandlewood soap on Persephone's soft white skin, seeing a beautiful but deadly teenager not much older than he, who flew through the air and killed with a touch — but promised to treat him like any other boy. "If you do not believe me, ask Natasha," Persephone suggested, nodding toward his former babysitter turned renegade nun. "She seemed utterly doomed when she came to me, and now is useful and much admired."

Natasha smiled to show it was true, but Alexi looked dubious. Lady D'Hay tartly told them, "He is not just 'any' boy."

Persephone rose to go, saying, "A day may come when he wishes he was." Leading Natasha from the hall, the Killer of Children went to the kitchens, where she told every turn-spit and baker's boy what she had told Alexi, that she was taking children out of Hebektahay Castle, and they were free to come too. Some put down their work at once, following her through the barns and living quarters, where she told the same story to serving girls and stable boys. By the time they reached the inner wall walk, with its sweeping view of the three walled baileys, ringed by the river and the enemy lines, they had a dozen excited children trooping behind them, suddenly free of their chores, sounding happy, scared, and hopeful. Nor did Persephone disappoint them. Calling to her roc, she had the big bird fly up to perch on the battlements, introducing her to the awestruck children — then two by two she flew them down to the basilica roof in the ward below. Then the Killer of Children came back for Natasha, saying, "Now comes the worst part."

And it was. Dodging darts and fireballs flung at them by D'Brovniks, they flew down to the outer ward's riverbank postern, the tiny gate wedged between the bailey walls and the river's edge, where the Bride of the D'Hays dumped her refuse. Babies lay abandoned by the gate, and Persephone searched through them for signs of life, finding two she could save, and one so gone that the Killer of Children could only end his suffering. The others were already dead. Natasha took the two they could salvage, and went searching for children among the people huddled at the

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river's edge, serfs and aged townsfolk, living on belt leather and boiled grass. D'Brovnik archers shot anyone attempting to leave the shadow of the walls, hoping the D'Hays would be forced to feed them. Emptying the food from her saddle bag so Natasha could use it to carry the babies, Persephone found three emaciated children whose parents gladly gave them up.

Back atop the Basilica of the Black Virgin, smiling nuns took the abandoned babies, vowing to beg milk from the lords in the keep. Eros had returned with *Selene*, and was taking on another load of noisy well-fed children, while off-loading sacks of millet from the skyship. Natasha sensed minute planning at work, and saw the urgent need for secrecy, for the first load of children could not have gone far. Somewhere close by, atop an unscalable rock, or on an island in the Brovva, was a secret shrine, stockpiled with food beforehand under the unsuspecting noses of the D'Brovniks. Now children were being swapped for food, with the *Selene* running full each way. More magical misdirection, since so long as the children simply disappeared, no D'Brovniks would come looking for them. To adults in the doomed citadel, it seemed children were vanishing into thin air, replaced by their weight in beans and sweet cakes — making some of the younger nuns and novices giddy with excitement. Fear and hopelessness faded. Even families that did not give up their children could at least feed them, having an option other than watching them die. Eros met them at the skyship's ladder, saying, "Someone from the keep to see you."

Standing on the quarterdeck, between the pigeon coop and the ballast taps, still wearing royal blue-and-silver, was young Alexi D'Hay, looking very pleased with himself. Sunlight shone on the D'Hay shock of wheat, done in cloth-of-gold on his chest. He announced proudly, "I have come to offer myself."

Persephone smiled, "What did Lady D'Hay say?"

He replied loftily, "My aunt thinks I am having a geography lesson."

"Which you shall," Eros assured him. "The best place to learn geography is a quarter-mile up."

"First let me speak with him." Persephone led Alexi into the aft cabin for a private interview, from which young D'Hay emerged looking more self-important than ever. Before leaving *Selene*, Persephone took Natasha

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too aside, whispering, "Watch Alexi for me, and keep him happy. We may dearly have need of him, but he must be handled delicately."

Natasha nodded, knowing that young Lord Alexi was all boy, and a boyar-to-be, nine parts ego, with a dash of devilment — only someone as loving and ruthless as Persephone could hope to control him. Best Natasha could do was to keep watch on him, making sure he did not climb the rigging lines or fall overboard. Eros dumped water ballast and took off, using the increased lift and foot-powered fans to maneuver the *Selene* upwind, back the way they had come. Alexi oohed excitedly, asking innumerable questions, without awaiting any answers, hanging dangerously far over the quarterdeck rail.

Weary of fielding wild questions, Natasha asked one of her own, "Why did you come?" Alexi had always been alarmingly willful, but showed little interest in sacrificing for others.

"Because of her!" Alexi's eyes lit up at the thought of Persephone. "She is amazing, is she not?" Clearly Alexi was in love. Small wonder. Persephone was smashingly beautiful and utterly fearless, and being a boy, young Lord D'Hay was not the least turned off by her bow and poison arrows.

"And you, too, Natasha," Alexi assured her he had not forgotten his former babysitter. "You were always so nice, and let me do what I wanted. I trust you, much more than Aunt Constance, who is shrill and overbearing, and got us into this terrible mess. If you trust Persephone, so do I."

Natasha thanked him, hoping love and trust did not get Alexi killed. Until now Natasha had been doing good, taking children out of a ghastly situation. But Alexi's situation had been anything but ghastly, living in luxury, with both sides wanting him alive and well — just under their control. Now Alexi had given himself to Persephone instead, following Natasha's example, so whatever happened to him was in some sense her doing.

She thought the hiding place might be an island in the Brovva, or an unassailable rock, but it turned out to be both. Not far upstream a tall flat rock outcropping rose right out of the river, dividing the Brovva into a pair of white cataracts, making it nearly impossible to get to the rock by land or water. From above Natasha could see the hidden shrine, nestled in a low hollow atop the plateau, several small buildings surrounded by a drystone

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wall — already overrun with children. Releasing gas from the parasail, Eros glided down to a landing before the shrine, dropping grapples to a female ground crew.

Children helped reel them down to a jubilant reunion, their enthusiasm turning the rescue operation into an impromptu party. Games got going full tilt, while adults piled food aboard the skyship to replace newly arrived kids. Ground crew comforted the more traumatized kids, who missed their mothers or demanded to return to homes and families that no longer existed. Upriver accents showed the adults came from Nordling, or even farther north, and in normal times the secret shrine must have been nearly deserted. By now Natasha knew from hints and clues that Persephone and Eros came from far beyond Nordling, from the frigid white land of death, where winters were black hell and the summer Sun shone at midnight. Persephone slept under a white bearskin coverlet, and Eros wore arctic fox trim on his doublet.

Older children reveled in their newfound freedom from fear, death, and parental discipline. Here there was no war, no hunger, no chores, no lessons, just an incredible high-flying holiday. So long as they did not hurt each other, or fall off the rock, anything was allowed. Natasha watched as Alexi took charge of the boys, selecting the games and assigning roles, which the others gladly accepted, happy to have a lordling leading them. Natasha knew from long experience that boys would put up with anything, so long as the pecking order was in place.

When Persephone arrived on roc back, Natasha attended her in the aft cabin, where the Killer of Children asked how things went with Alexi. "Well enough," Natasha confessed — then added hesitantly, "Do you know Alexi is in love with you?"

"Yes, shamelessly so," Persephone smiled proudly, "much to Lady Constance's dismay." Lady D'Hay had to be having fits at the moment, facing thousands of angry D'Brovniks without her lordly nephew and chief bargaining chip. Now Lady Constance was just another titled female in a doomed fortress, whose best hope was to disappear into a nunnery, or more likely a D'Brovnik haram. Persephone laughed. "I know boys far better than Lady D'Hay. Boys are half my business."

Natasha nodded, betting they were the harder half. "So he will do whatever you want?"

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"Apparently," Persephone replied. "Which is why we must be careful, for love is a terrible thing to abuse. And Alexi is a child under my care."

Natasha nodded, thinking so was she. How unfair that Alexi rated such attention, just for being an obstinate boy and a boyar. His feelings were catered to, and he got long personal meetings with Persephone, and lorded over the other children — while she dodged catapult darts and cared for starving babies. Reading her mind, Persephone told her, "Do not be jealous. You have done wonderfully, bearing up better than I could ever have imagined. When we are done here at Hebektahay, you have more than discharged your debt to me."

"But I want to be with you," Natasha blurted out — she wanted Persephone's admiration, not Alexi's, nor some mews boy's. At the moment, she could not imagine life without Persephone, dirty starving babies and all. "I gave myself to you."

Persephone smiled, taking Natasha's face in hands, and looking straight into her eyes, saying, "So you did, and for a good reason. Though what that reason is, I do not yet know — but I am both pleased and happy that you chose me." The Killer of Children kissed her, then added, "Flattered even."

"My other choice was being stoned to death," Natasha reminded her.

"Sometimes fate needs a helping hand," Persephone explained airily. "Still, you chose me sight unseen. Are you disappointed?"

"Not at all." Natasha reveled in the touch and eye-contact, in having this magical person to herself, even though the venom rings felt chill against her cheeks.

"Come, fly back to Hebektahay with me," Persephone suggested. "Young Lord D'Hay will be fine with Eros until we get back. Cousin Eros is but an overgrown boy himself." Natasha climbed onto the roc's saddle, thrilled by hearing "we" from the Killer of Children. As they flew back to Hebektahay, she thought of Helena, wishing her friend had been given this choice, a chance to do something decent instead of dying a miserable death at the hands of unforgiving men. Everyone should have that choice. Winging along, her arms about Persephone's waist, Natasha missed Helena grievously, but she knew people around her were losing everything, forced to give up even their children.

Her best way to mourn Helena was to save others from her fate.

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Hebektahay Castle appeared ahead, and the roc crossed high over the D'Brovnik lines, then spiraled down toward the middle ward. Having seen her do this before, D'Brovniks had hauled a powerful ballista, a giant crossbow on wheels, to the top of the earth ramp overlooking the outer ward, siting it carefully for a single shot.

Natasha did not see the ballista fire, so the long steel dart seemed to come out of nowhere, hitting the roc beneath the right wing and shooting through the raptor's breast. Piercing the saddle as well, the steel shaft ripped through Natasha's skirt, cut a long gash in her thigh, and shot upward, hitting Persephone in the back of the head. Blood splashed over Natasha's face, some of it her own.

Blinded by the blood, she hung onto Persephone's limp form, feeling the roc buckle beneath them. They were going down, and there was nothing Natasha could do. Falling into a flapping spin, the dying roc whirled earthward, while Natasha held tight to the limp Persephone, keeping the Killer of Children in the saddle. Legs locked in the saddle straps, Natasha clung grimly to her mistress, praying to the Virgin as the world spun around her, not letting go of Persephone until they slammed into the ground.

Gilded Cage

NATASHA AWOKE in a dark moving box, with a horrible headache and a stabbing pain in her leg. Without opening her eyes, Natasha knew she was back in the little traveling house that had taken her and Sister Ida from Brovazamak to the Shrine of the Dark Maiden at Karadyevachka. She could feel the sway of the wagon and Sister Ida's warm still body beside her. It seemed strange to be back in that little house, for so much had happened since she left it. But her whole time with the Killer of Children now seemed at best a blurry dream, full of blatantly impossible images, from blonde bold Persephone seated on her roc, to the hell of Hebektahay Castle. Totally unbelievable, though her hurting and banged brain insisted it was all true.

Sister Ida's long warm leg lay across Natasha's bared hip, feeling familiar and comforting — but Natasha was vaguely nauseated, her leg

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hurt, and she was not at all in an amorous mood. Cautiously, so as not to bump her hurt leg, nor rouse the sleeping nun, she slid out from under Sister Ida, propped herself up, and opened her eyes.

Only her eyes did not open. No matter how hard Natasha tried, she could not raise her lids. Weird, and scary. Panicking, she put her hands to her face, finding her eyes glued shut, caked with something splashed on her face. Wetting her fingers, she frantically unglued her lids, tasting blood.

Her eyes struggled open, and Natasha saw it was not as dark as she thought, nor was she in the traveling house at all. She was lying on ratty cushions in a moving wooden box, rolling along a rutted road, with daylight filtering through cracks in the warped wood. Her dress had been slit to the hip, and her thigh was bandaged where it hurt. Flies buzzed about the warm closed wooden interior.

Instead of Sister Ida, it was Persephone lying next to her, face down and naked, the back of her blonde head a mass of dried blood, drawing flies. Everything came back to Natasha in a hideous instant: the flight back to Hebektahay, the shaft hitting them, the whirling fall — and now here. What covered her face and glued her lids was Persephone's blood. Gagging at the thought, Natasha threw up onto the straw-covered floor, just managing to miss the stained cushions.

Devastated, Natasha leaned her head against the box, wiping her mouth with her arm, trying hard not to cry. D'Brovniks had her. If she had fallen within the walls of Hebektahay, she would not be going anywhere. Thank Heaven Persephone was alive. Her hand rested on the Killer of Children's bare rib cage, drawing strength from the deep steady breathing. So long as Persephone was with her, Natasha had hope; though at the moment, things felt awfully bleak. No doubt she was headed back to Brovazamak, unless perchance there was someplace worse, but aside from her ghastly headache, and the wound in her thigh, she had survived the fall admirably. No broken bones, no sprained limbs — the roc must have cushioned her fall. Persephone was the one hurting.

Determined not to fail Persephone the way she failed Helena, Natasha looked about, seeing a water bucket in one corner, which turned out to be half full. Taking a drink first, she washed her face, careful to keep the water clean for Persephone. Then she dragged the bucket over to the Killer of Children, and washed the wound at the back of her head, wiping off

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clotted blood, biting away hanks of hair with her teeth. It was a scalp wound, messy but not down to the bone. Cleaning it as best she could, Natasha finally did cry, softly while she worked, tears falling on her hands, on Persephone's fine blonde hair, and into the wound itself, helping to wash it. When she had the wound clear, she used needle and thread from her apron to close it — not perfect, but not likely to fester either.

Heaven knew what was going on inside Persephone's head; she had not stirred, even while Natasha was sewing the wound closed. Worrisome, but only if she did not wake up. For now, Persephone was getting some dearly needed sleep. Having seen to her mistress, Natasha examined her own wound, finding a clean gash, already scabbed over, painful but starting to heal. She mentally thanked the unknown woman who so diligently cleaned and dressed her wound. Putting her eye to a crack, Natasha saw the Brovva shining between the trees, showing they were indeed headed south. How many days had it been between Brovazamak and Hebektahay? It hurt her head to try to remember. Settling down, she went back to sleep herself.

Persephone slept through that day and the next, thoroughly frightening Natasha. Each day the guards lowered food and water through a trap, while her toilet was a hole in the floor. Each day she washed Persephone's wound, asking for hot boiled water, and actually getting some. On the third morning, Persephone's eyes flipped open, taking a puzzled look around, then her lips moved, asking, "Am I dreaming?"

"No," Natasha told her, relieved to see the Killer of Children awake, but Persephone had already fallen back to sleep, her soft young face looking totally at peace.

Later that day, the blue eyes opened again, and Persephone asked, "Where am I?"

"We are prisoners in a wagon box," Natasha explained excitedly, glad to have her mistress awake again, sounding far happier than the news warranted. "Being hauled south by the D'Brovniks."

"However did we get here?" Persephone seemed completely puzzled by her surroundings. Slowly Natasha coaxed the memories out of her, starting with their success at Hebektahay Castle, getting out boatloads of children, including Alexi D'Hay himself. "We did?" Persephone was impressed. "Alexi too?"

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"He's in love with you," Natasha reminded her, nor was Alexi the only one.

"Another conquest." Persephone winced, examining the wound on the back of her head with her fingertips. "Why can I not do so well with grown men? Something about me makes men wary. Was that who gave me this? Some man with a grudge — most likely one I never met?"

Too true. Boys might like the arrows and attitude, but men saw Persephone as a menace. Their loss so far as Natasha was concerned, but she did not say so. Persephone had forgotten all about their kiss before boarding the roc, and her vow to take time for Natasha. Now she felt shy about the kiss, and Persephone's promise sounded pretty silly — since they faced days together. Natasha settled for a safe summary, telling how they left Alexi with Eros, and then were shot down returning to Hebektahay Castle, landing them here. "Amazing," Persephone declared, still tenderly examining her wound, "and I do remember some of it. Who cleaned and sewed up my head?"

"That would be me," Natasha admitted, wishing she had done a better job of stitching.

"Thank you immensely." Persephone pulled Natasha closer and kissed her tenderly. "You are smart and brave, and have aided me incredibly. I am sorry I have gotten you into this horrible place. I am sure I meant well, and must have had some plan ready if things went wrong. Only now I cannot remember what it was...."

Natasha said nothing, still recovering from being pressed to Persephone's naked breast and kissed so lovingly. Persephone liked her — a lot. Bad as things were, that was enough to put butterflies in Natasha's stomach. She had so wanted to be included in Persephone's world, and now their world had shrunk to this wooden box, until the D'Brovniks let them out.

Despite the dim light she could see every curve in the Killer of Children's slim blonde body. Persephone had a strange way of holding herself, bold and forward without seeming seductive — but not like a man either. More like a hawk. Now that Natasha had studied the Killer of Children in detail, she saw why; the demi-goddess had a body trained since girlhood to be strong and graceful, a body Persephone completely trusted, neither needing to be hidden, nor displayed. Wanting to know everything,

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Natasha decided to start at the beginning. "Who is your mother? What is she like?"

"Mother? My mother?" Persephone got up, still holding the back of her head, carefully examining the box they were in. "She is a most sainted woman, meek as a mouse, lives on a holy isle and never eats meat. Looks nothing like me. Hard to think we are even related...."

"And your father?" asked Natasha, following Persephone's every movement.

"Never met the man myself," Persephone admitted, "but Mother thought the world of him...."

While Persephone prowled about testing the box, working life back into her limbs, Natasha kept asking questions, learning that the Killer of Children was born in a far-off northern castle where the Inner Sound ran into the white frozen Arctic Sea. Her sainted mother was Goddess-on-Earth, and lived in a sanctuary called Fair Isle, where they ate fruit and grains, and no one died except by natural causes. With Mother living the contemplative life, the family was led by Persephone's older sister, Lady Kore, the Dark Daughter, demi-goddess of Death. Kore had seen to her training, and someday Persephone would succeed her sister as Lady Death and Dark Daughter. "To start me out easy, Kore and Mother made me the Killer of Children." Persephone sat back down beside her, adding, "Though I actually think Eros suggested it."

"Eros? Really?" Natasha had no idea how this weird family worked.

"So he could get me alone." Persephone smiled at Natasha's surprise. "Eros is all male. And since Kore got a Sea Beggar boyfriend, Eros has turned his charm on me. He hopes to get one of us with child, so he may have an heir in the family."

Jolting to a halt, the moving box opened and light flooded in through the trap above. Seeing Persephone up and awake, guards became wary, making a young servant lower the food and water while they pointed bows and spears at that trap, treating the Killer of Children like a scorpion in a bottle. And rightly so, since whoever took her bow and clothes had not dared touch her venom rings. Blinking in the bright sunlight, Natasha looked back up at the men's faces, seeing bearded D'Brovniks in armor, and a nervous young servant. Then the trap closed, and they were alone again. Dinner was biscuits, hard cheese, and cold bacon, washed down

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with Brovva water. As they ate, Natasha asked cautiously, "Do you have much experience with men?"

Persephone laughed. "Only if you count cousin Eros."

"You slept with Eros?"

"Slept?" Persephone looked puzzled, saying, "Not that I recall, but he did show me several ingenious ways to bring a man to orgasm — the sort of instruction Mother was never any good at."

Persephone nodded toward the closed trap. "You saw how it is. I keep my eyes open, but it is hard to meet the right sort of man — though the boy who lowered the water bucket was cute. Did you see how he leaned down to have a closer look? Of course when I smiled back at him, he nearly dropped the bucket. But being Lady Death's little sister has this one great advantage — any man who lays hands on me must be brave, and in earnest."

"What about women?" Natasha asked cautiously. "Do you like women?"

"Absolutely," Persephone declared, chewing on a bit of cheese, "we are a most marvelous sex. I thank the Mother every morning that I was not born a man."

Natasha saw she was being teased. "I mean women as lovers."

"Women or girls?" Persephone arched an inquiring eyebrow, then smiled, reaching out to Natasha, saying, "Come over here." Natasha did, and the Killer of Children put an arm around her, saying, "You are mine. You gave yourself to me. So like Alexi, you are a child in my care — anything else would not be proper between us." Natasha understood, though it seemed unfair that a pagan demi-goddess should have more scruples toward her charges than Sister Ida, who was married to God.

To take away some of the disappointment, Persephone kissed her again. "Just because I am the Killer of Children does not mean I have no feelings. I like you a lot, and we work well together — despite all current evidence to the contrary." Persephone nodded to indicate the box they were in, not sounding the least worried by it. "You chose me for a reason," Persephone reminded her, "though we do not know what it is yet. And you will not always be a child under my care — time is the true killer of children."

Natasha admitted she had never been with a man, and though in some ways she ached for it, the prospect made her uneasy.

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Except for the guards leading her to sacrifice, men had been either indifferent or mean to her. "It scares me some."

"Do not worry, it is easier than it sounds," Persephone assured her, giving her shoulders a squeeze. "One day the right man will just be there. And when he finds out you were once a nun, there will be no stopping him. Nothing moves a man more than a pretty young virgin who was supposed to go to God."

"But why?" She thought of Sister Ida, who seemed perfectly happy seeing men only through a veil.

"Because that is where children come from," Persephone reminded her. "Besides, it is fun. You will see."

Easy for her to say. Even naked and in a box, the Killer of Children terrified the D'Brovniks, who never opened the trap except to feed them. They had to see the world through cracks in the wood, or by looking down the toilet hole. After studying the roadway passing below, Persephone announced that the siege of Hebektahay had been lifted. Marvelous news if true. Natasha thought of all those doomed people, asking, "How do you know?"

"Horse droppings," Persephone explained happily, still staring down the toilet hole, "the whole road is covered with them, showing masses of cavalry moving ahead of us. And infantry too, mashing the older droppings flat, all headed south. It has to be the besieging D'Brovniks giving up and going home — there is no other army hereabouts. They must have heard we have Alexi."

"And they have us," Natasha reminded her high-flying mistress.

"For the moment," Persephone admitted. Just how much the Killer of Children frightened her captors was clear when they got to Brovazamak. Arriving at early noontide, they were hauled by hand through the town streets to the palace citadel. Natasha heard children shout and dogs bark, and the hollow rumble of one drawbridge, then another. Finally gates closed behind them, then came silence, no scrape of boots, no men's voices, nothing.

When the wagon rear came banging down, Natasha saw why. Nuns were waiting, fully veiled, in a big windowless room lit only by lamplight. Despite all their arms and armor, not a single D'Brovnik was brave enough to open the box, letting wives of God do it instead. Natasha scrambled out, saying to Persephone, "We are in the haram."

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"We are?" Persephone slid out of the wagon to stand beside her, staring at the tall tapestried chamber, whose rafters were carved with cherubs edged in gold. "At least it is pretty. What part? Have you been here before?"

"No," Natasha told her, "which makes me think we are in the Gilded Cage."

"What is the Gilded Cage?" Persephone looked curiously about, clearly new to haram life.

"Deep inside the D'Brovnik haram there is a windowless walled-off section that no one ever sees," Natasha explained, "surrounding a barred court, called the Gilded Cage — used to hold women and children who need to be kept alive, but cannot be let out. Spare heiresses. Insane heirs. Children of executed enemies. Rich and difficult former wives. Some stay in the Gilded Cage their whole lives, or until menopause makes them safe to release. Or just until they are old enough to publicly execute. Outsiders only see the plush entrance chamber, a big tapestried room with pink-painted cherubs on the ceiling."

"Pretty cherubs," Persephone agreed, following the silent nuns through the gold doorway, entering the Gilded Cage. Natasha found herself in the smallest, fanciest nunnery she had ever seen, complete with kitchens, bakery, hen coops, milk cows, and a brewery, all indoors — its windowless walls decorated with gold leaf designs. Nuns gave them gray silk robes to wear, and bowls of rice and curried chicken, telling them to take their food into the garden. Which they did.

Noon sunlight fell through steel bars covered in gold, splashing onto a fountained court. Colonnades ran around the first two stories, letting air and light into the apartments, but the third story was blank white stone, all the way up to the gilt bars. Women did their washing in the fountain, and children played nearby, several happy toddlers, two grave-eyed girls with brown hair, and a sickly looking older boy. One of the girls solemnly came over, saying, "You are new."

"So we are," the Killer of Children agreed. "I am Persephone, and this is Natasha. Who are you?"

"Lady Sofia Turgorov," the girl replied gravely, then indicated her younger sister, saying, "This is Lady Maria."

Natasha recognized the Turgorov heiresses, not seen since the smaller

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one's birth. How weird it must be to grow up under a barred sky, with this court and apartments as your whole world, never seeing anything that did not come through the Gold Door. D'Brovniks meant for grown men to remain a total mystery to these two girls, since so long as the sisters were childless the vast Turgorov estates remained in D'Brovnik hands. Happy to have two new souls in their world, Lady Sofia and Lady Maria introduced the other children, including Baron D'Brovnik's own niece, and a sickly boy who should have been Lord D'Loy — slated to be strangled if he showed any signs of reaching puberty.

Nuns took their dishes, inviting them to use the bathhouse built into one corner of the court, where conduits carried hot water down from the upstairs boiler and rooftop cistern. Hearing an upriver accent, Natasha asked the nun, "Do you know Sister Ida from Nordling?"

Seeing the nun nod swiftly, Natasha begged her, "Please tell Sister Ida that Novice Natasha from Karadyevachka is in the Gilded Cage. Sister Ida will very much want to know." No nun could mistake her meaning.

Entering steamy perfumed darkness, dimly lit by sunlight coming through slits in the stone, Natasha stripped before a hot foamy cascade, sponging away the sweat and grime of travel, carefully cleaning the pink flesh growing around her scab. When she started to ask what they should do next, Persephone shushed her, saying, "Talk about something light. Like men."

From the way Persephone rolled her eyes, Natasha knew they were being overheard. Deciding to give any listening nuns an earful, she said the first frivolous thing that entered her head. "Do the mews boys really like me?"

"Well, one of them." Persephone laughed, leading her to the steaming circular pool in the center of the bathhouse.

Sliding into the warm clean water, Natasha felt tension dissolve, and knots loosen at the back of her neck. "Which one?" she asked. "The cute one?"

Shaking her head, Persephone replied sadly, "Sorry, he is gay."

That did not sound so bad. "Too carefree and frivolous?"

Persephone laughed again. "No, a sodomite."

"Too bad." Natasha lay on her back, staring at the dark stone ceiling, wondering who might be listening. Upstairs was the boiler and sauna, and

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below them the heating pipes and drains. From near the nuns' entrance came the hollow click of something being set down on the stone.

"I have always thought so," Persephone agreed, paddling about the pool. "Unless you are a boy."

Looking up, Natasha saw a bowl of sherbet sitting by the nuns' entrance, beside a single spoon. Lemon sherbet by the smell of it. Mentally thanking the sisters, Natasha got out of the pool to fetch it, warm threads of water falling from her nude form. As she knelt to pick up the bowl, a pair of brawny eunuchs in loincloths stepped through the entrance, seized her arms, and pinned them behind her. Shocked and scared, she opened her mouth to yell, but a third eunuch looped a bowstring about her neck, pulling it tight, cutting off her startled cry. Her kicking stopped, and though she could not move, she saw with crystal clarity, taking in every horrific detail as it happened.

Kazak archers descended the stairs from the sauna above, bows bent, arrows pointed at Persephone. D'Brovnik men-at-arms wearing mail and holding swords stepped out of the nuns' entrance. Helpless, unable to move or speak, struggling just to breathe, Natasha saw the scene recede into some weird waking nightmare, fading around the edges. Moments ago, she had been warm and happy, already tasting the sherbet. Now she hung limp in the eunuch's hands, watching Persephone wade toward her from far away, ignoring the Kazak bows.

Bows did not frighten Persephone. To be Killer of Children meant she accepted her own death — anytime and anyplace — always ready to lay down her life for her charges. If she feared death, how could Persephone perform abortions, or kill a deformed baby? Stepping out of the nuns' entrance, a man-at-arms foolishly came between them at the pool's edge, thinking a wet naked woman was no match for a swordsman in mail.

Smiling grimly, Persephone lashed out with her left hand, grabbing the wrist of his sword arm, venomed fingers finding the patch of bare flesh between his leather glove and mail sleeve. Face white, the warrior went limp, dropping his sword and pitching forward. Grabbing him by his steel collar, Persephone kept the paralyzed man-at-arms from falling into the pool, at the same time shielding herself from the archers, saying cheerfully in Kazak, "Hold your fire, brothers. Shoot me, and the round-eye drowns."

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Baron D'Brovnik himself stepped out of the nuns' entrance, wearing full armor and flanked by torchbearers, saying, "Stop! Come any closer, and we will kill her."

Natasha felt the bowstring tighten as the tension mounted, cutting off her air completely. Persephone stood at the edge of the pool, still holding up the hapless man-at-arms, saying, "She has given herself to me, and lies under my protection."

"And no harm will come to her," Baron D'Brovnik hastened to agree. "She shall be returned intact when we have completed our pressing business...."

Natasha blacked out. First her vision went, but she could still hear far-off voices in the dark, though she had no interest in what they said. All Natasha's consciousness was on the bowstring about her neck, hurting like fire and tearing at her throat, making her head seem to explode in blackness.

WHEN SHE AWOKE, Natasha lay wrapped in silk sheets scented with musk, in an ornate bed with the cloth-of-gold canopy pulled back to reveal a sumptuous lamp-lit chamber, floored by thick Persian carpets and walled with warm Polish tapestries. Had her neck not still hurt, she would have thought herself in Heaven. Ghastly memories crowded in, full of helpless horror, of how it felt to strangle in strong remorseless hands attached to brawny arms and blank faces. As they throttled her, the eunuchs had looked only at Baron D'Brovnik, reading his lips. Somehow she had survived the three mutes of the bowstring, implacable haram executioners who could not be bribed, swayed, nor threatened. How many women could say that? Too few for sure.

Waiting on the bed table was a crystal pitcher of water, salve for her throat, herb tea, and a stoppered bottle of peach brandy, along with sugar wafers and several lemons. On the gold bed lay a lady's chemise and a long-sleeved crimson gown, trimmed with gold-embroidered flowers. Someone was seeing to her every need, and more. Outstanding. That meant Persephone was alive; otherwise the D'Brovniks would have disposed of Natasha. At best she would be in some cell, awaiting slow dismemberment, not lodged in plush apartments, rubbing salve on her raw throat.

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This could only mean they cared for the Killer of Children's good opinion. Her last blurry image had been of Persephone, defiant and unhurt, shielding her bare body with a man-at-arms. Hopefully her mistress was still unharmed and unbroken.

Natasha spiked her herb tea with peach brandy and set out to explore the premises, hoping Persephone was asleep in the next room; finding three rooms, with a private bath and flush toilet, all windowless except for white arabesque screens opening onto air shafts and the inner court, and all leading to a single locked door — with no Persephone. Her only companions were a half-dozen songbirds in a silver cage. But by pressing her ear against the bedroom screen she could hear children playing.

Nuns fed her twice daily, sliding china bowls and silver filigree trays through a slot in her single door. Plush as it was, it was still a prison, walled away from people and sunlight. Everytime the slot opened, she was there, trying to chat up the nun on the other side, keeping it light, never asking for anything the nun could not readily give. Begging fennel for her tea, but not asking to pass notes to Persephone.

On the third morning her constant efforts to make friends met with success, as the lock turned and the painted door opened. In came the nun, carrying Natasha's breakfast tray, setting it silently on the floor between them — though this was strictly forbidden. Closing and locking the door, the nun lifted her veil to reveal tears of happiness. It was Sister Ida.

Before she could recover, Sister Ida had kissed her, saying tearfully, "How wonderful to see you! I prayed for you every day, never thinking to see you again."

No one ever said that to Natasha before; a bit taken aback by this godsend, she stammered, "How did you get here?"

"One of the regular nuns has a lover outside of the Cage, and needed someone to take her place. Right now the owner of this habit is locked in naked embrace, or she is very much wasting her time outside." That last was plainly Sister Ida's idea of what they ought to be doing.

Realizing this was an opportunity that might never come again, she told Sister Ida, "Take off your habit and veil."

Natasha did not have to ask twice. Slipping out of her habit, Sister Ida started on the shift underneath, but Natasha stayed her hand. "Wait here for me. I must use the habit and veil. No one will know it is not you."

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"Wait," Sister Ida protested, "what are you doing?" Natasha stopped Sister Ida with a kiss, sliding the habit and veil out of the nun's hands. Who could Sister Ida complain to? The nun from Nordling was in the Gilded Cage illegally, to see a novice she had seduced in violation of both their vows. Would they punish her any worse for being out of uniform?

Taking the keys as well, Natasha put on the habit and veil, then opened the door and picked up the breakfast tray, saying, "There is peach brandy by the bed, and I will be back as quick as I can to drink it with you."

For the first time since Helena died, she was seeing the world through a veil, a shadowy softening of sight and sound, turning life into a gray whisper. Holding the tray before her, she glided down a short corridor, stopped to check the apartment next to hers — found it empty. Children were playing in the central courtyard. Her apartment occupied one corner of the Gilded Cage, and the baths occupied another, which left two more corners where the apartments did not front on the courtyard, and could hold secret prisoners. Four apartments at least, maybe more. And who knew what they would contain? Trying to better her odds, she strolled purposefully up to the children, pausing before Lady Maria, and saying, "This breakfast is for the blonde woman brought in a few days ago. Which apartment is hers?"

Lady Maria did not answer, and her older sister was not there to ask. Lady Sofia, whose name meant wisdom, would have known. One of the boys shouted out, "There is a blonde in the south tower."

Another boy agreed. "Ground floor." Persephone was the sort of woman boys noticed. Natasha set out for the south corner, her silver breakfast tray in front of her, feeling almost invisible in her veil. There were things she missed about being a nun, wafting about in a world of women, able to see men but never having them see you — a secure, secret world of service and silent anonymity, where love of anyone but God was outlawed. Far better ordered than the world outside, but mind-numbingly boring, especially compared to life with the Killer of Children.

Finding the ground floor apartment, she nervously tried keys until one turned; she prayed Persephone was on the other side. Retrieving the tray, she slipped inside and closed the door. First floor rooms were empty, and the apartment was an exact twin of hers — but with royal blue trim — so she knew immediately how to find the bedroom, mounting white

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marble stairs edged with lapis, lit by light falling through intricate alabaster screens. Stairs opened onto a sky blue chamber with a canopy bed, and Natasha saw a mass of blonde hair on the powder blue coverlet, as a familiar voice called out, "More food? Wonderful. I am famished. Feels like I am eating for twelve. Set it down here."

Natasha nearly dropped the tray, stopped and stared in disbelief, suddenly knowing how Sister Ida felt on hearing she had come back from the Shrine of the Dark Maiden. Propped up on velvet bed cushions with the powder blue coverlet around her was blonde, freckle-faced Helena, pleading, "Pour me a tiny glass of tea, would you? With sugar? It is so hard to do it from here."

Helena sat there, wrapped in sheets, looking fat and sassy, and hoping to be waited on — just like always. Tears streaming down her cheeks, Natasha just managed to set down the tray before whipping off her veil and leaping onto the bed, giving the startled Helena a tremendous hug, saying, "Thank heavens you are alive!"

"Natasha?" Helena had asked for some tea and gotten tackled instead. "Is it you?"

"Of course it is me." Helena was the miracle here, and Natasha covered her with kisses.

"But how?" Helena asked, returning the kisses, as happily amazed as Natasha. "I was told you were sacrificed, thrown as a virgin offering into Burning Mountain in the Iron Wood?"

"Much exaggerated," Natasha explained. "I was given to the Killer of Children at Karadyevachka."

"Sounds ghastly enough." Helena shuddered, pulling the coverlet tighter, naked beneath the bedclothes. "Now get me that tea, will you?"

Natasha poured Helena tea in a glass, stirring in the sugar, saying, "Sounds ghastly, but actually it has been unbelievably grand." Handing Helena her tea, she asked, "How are you alive?"

Taking the tea glass, Helena patted her belly, saying, "Pregnant, very happily with child. Thanks to my loving late-husband's last act of rape, I cannot be executed for another seven months or more."

Helena not just alive, but pregnant? Incredible. First a lady and heiress, then a baroness and murderess, now a mother-to-be, Helena kept on growing up at breakneck speed. Giving her friend a tremendous hug,

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Natasha told her how happy she had made her. Helena smiled coyly, "By being alive, or being with child?"

"Both," Natasha declared, kissing Helena long and hard, thrilling to the wet familiar taste of her friend's mouth. And not just Helena, she was tasting the baby too. After being horribly alone, now suddenly there were three of them. Natasha was determined to enjoy every moment of this miracle.

When she let go, Helena looked up at her, surprised by the intensity of the kiss, not used to Natasha saying how and when, much less what to do. Studying her friend intently, Helena asked, "What has happened to you?"

"I have given myself to the Killer of Children," Natasha explained. For the first time ever they were equals, not because Natasha had risen any, but because the proud D'Hays had been humbled. They were no longer heiress and playmate, young lady and serving maid, nor baroness and confessor — but two condemned criminals in the Gilded Cage. "You will too. It is the most wonderful thing imaginable."

"So it seems." Helena had little choice, needing Natasha as never before. "Is that where you got the bruises on your neck?"

"No, that happened here." The mutes of the bowstring had left their mark on her neck. Natasha slid off the bed and picked up the keys, determined to check the other corner apartments until she found Persephone. For the first time ever she was leader, the prisoner with the keys and the plan — not to mention a devoted nun waiting for her in another corner apartment. While Helena lay naked and abed, idly awaiting post-partum execution. "We must start by finding Persephone."

"Finding who?" Helena threw off her coverlet and strode naked to her wardrobe to pick through her gowns. Seeing Helena in the nude nearly undid Natasha; one thing that had not changed was her love, and Helena well knew how to use it, flaunting white haram curves that pregnancy only made prettier, more full of life and purpose.

"Persephone," Natasha told her, remembering her own purpose. Much as she loved Helena, her mistress had gotten them into this mess, and it was up to Natasha to get them out. "You will see."

Helena grabbed a blue silk robe edged in cloth-of-silver, and caught Natasha at the door to the neighboring apartment — which proved empty,

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leaving just the east corner. But with Helena in tow, Natasha had to be wary about crossing the courtyard. Washing was underway, and nuns were busy weeding, leaving nothing to do but brazen it out, striding purposefully down the colonnade toward the east corner apartments. No one even looked up until Helena came flouncing out in her blue silk robe, happily seeing the sun for the first time in weeks. Nuns dropped their tasks, startled to see a secret prisoner on the loose, while children returned Helena's happy waves. Natasha ignored them, going to the ground floor apartment and turning the key in the door, praying for Persephone to be there.

And Persephone was, wearing haram pants and a pretty gold embroidered jacket, with green leaves twining over the trim and sleeves, coolly waiting to see what nun would boldly come through her locked door. Natasha doffed her veil, and Persephone smiled, asking, "How is your neck?"

"Still hurting." But her heart was happy, seeing Persephone alive and whole. Natasha thought of the first time she saw the demi-goddess, so cold and dangerous aboard her bird of prey. Never did Natasha think she would be so happy to see the Killer of Children.

Helena slid in behind her, closing the door in the nuns' veiled faces. Persephone's grin widened, acknowledging the newcomer. "And you would have to be Helena D'Hay."

Happy to have her fame precede her, Helena did a deft curtsy to the demi-goddess. "How did you know?"

"You are wearing D'Hay blue and silver," Persephone told her, "topped by grain-gold hair. Are you with child as well?"

Helena confessed she was, adding that she thought it hardly showed. Persephone laughed. "Babies are my business. When Natasha told me your story it was my duty to think, but what if she is pregnant? Would the D'Brovniks kill her before getting hold of the baby? Not likely." Helena was living proof Persephone reasoned right. Giving Natasha a told-you-so smile, she asked, "Now, are you happy you did not jump off that cliff?"

"What cliff?" asked Helena, not liking to be left out.

"Tell you later." Natasha had forgotten her first impulse on seeing Persephone had been suicide. Determined to change the subject, she asked, "What happened with Baron D'Brovnik in the bath house?"

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"You had a bath with the baron?" Helena looked appalled at the notion of Persephone sharing a tub with her murderous father-in-law.

"Just one of his men-at-arms," Persephone admitted, "but it was not fatal. Now they are trying to trade me for Alexi D'Hay."

"Cousin Alexi?" Helena asked. "I thought he was safe in Hebektahay Castle."

"He has given himself to me," Persephone informed Helena primly.

Helena smiled at Natasha, saying, "Seems to be all the rage."

"Would that everyone were so cooperative." Persephone shook her head, saying, "Baron D'Brovnik is a horrible optimist, thinking he can cut a deal with Death. He has sent a demand to my sister Kore, the Dark Daughter, offering my life for Alexi."

Natasha doubted that she would readily give her life for spoiled, arrogant Alexi D'Hay, but she knew that Persephone would do it in a heartbeat. She asked, "Will your sister Kore agree to trade?"

Persephone smiled mirthlessly. "However much men might fear me, my older sister is ten times worse. I may be the Killer of Children, but Kore is Death herself — if she comes south at all, it will be to kill Baron D'Brovnik."

"Is your sister really so terrible?" Helena sounded impressed.

"Been feeding me snake venom since I was six," Persephone declared proudly. "It is what keeps us close."

Natasha guessed Kore would ruthlessly avenge Persephone, but not offer up any children for her safety. She asked her mistress, "What will we do?"

"First we must talk with the nuns." Persephone got up and opened the apartment's prettily painted door. Not surprisingly, the Mother Superior to the little nunnery stood outside, veiled and swathed in fabric, only her eyes showing, glaring at the demi-goddess. Persephone asked, "Do you know who I am?"

"I know," the nun nodded. "You are a godless lawless witch, who nearly killed a man in our bathhouse."

"Men have no business being in a nuns' bathhouse," Persephone pointed out.

"Small reason to kill him," sniffed the Mother Superior.

"If I meant to kill him, he would be dead," Persephone replied blandly. "Keep men out and there will be no trouble."

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"They are not always easy to keep out." Not even for a nun.

"Well at least try to have them castrated first," Persephone suggested, "this is a haram for Heaven's sake. Until you can run it properly these children are under my protection, including the unborn." Persephone nodded at Helena.

"All here are under our care," the Mother Superior insisted. "Your mere being here puts them all at risk. Twenty years ago, when Baron D'Brovnik first took power, he had every inmate in the Gilded Cage strangled — to make a fresh start. Nuns had to listen to their cries, and we do not want such terrible times to come again."

Who did? Persephone patiently explained, "I did not mean to be here, that too was Baron D'Brovnik's doing. He puts the children at risk, not me. Keep men out of the haram, and I will not have to kill them. And if you give me a pigeon offering each day, I promise to be gone as soon as I can."

"A pigeon?" Mother Superior thought that sounded suspiciously easy.

"From the Church of the Black Virgin in Brovazamak," Persephone stipulated. "One live pigeon a day, and tell them who it is for — do that, and I vow to leave as soon as possible."

"Leave tomorrow, and you may take the whole coop." Mother Superior turned and departed, leaving Natasha still another nun to deal with, Sister Ida, whom she left locked in her apartment, stripped of her habit and veil, nursing a bottle of peach brandy. Sister Ida was astonished to see her wayward novice return with the much mourned Helena and the Killer of Children. Though the surprised nun put a happy face on things, seeing Helena come skipping back from the dead had to be disappointing. While they talked, Sister Ida took wistful looks at the two teenagers, between hits of peach brandy, and when time came for her to go, the drunk nun took Natasha aside for a private good-bye, whispering, "She will never love you like I do."

Probably true, but even if Natasha could not have Helena's fickle love, she meant to face life afresh, and hopefully serve Persephone. Since this was most likely a long good-bye, she gave Sister Ida a passionate thankful kiss, saying, "You have been incredibly good to me, when I was in desperate need. Take care." Then Sister Ida was gone, leaving just a taste of peach brandy on Natasha's tongue.

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Each day thereafter the nuns brought a pigeon, and Persephone would write out a tiny note, attaching it to the bird's leg. Then she would release the bird, letting it fly off through the gleaming bars of the Gilded Cage. Natasha asked, "Will Eros come?"

Persephone nodded. "If he can. Eros is a wonder, when he puts his mind to it. But that means danger too, for when Eros arrives, D'Brovniks will come battering at the Golden Door. We must be ready."

Eros arrived in the stillness of noon, dropping on roc back out of a blue cloudless sky onto the bars of the Gilded Cage. Children shouted and pointed at the barred sky, alerting the other inmates. His bird alighted atop the bars, and Eros attached a grapple to the cage, letting *Selene* reel herself down. Then he unslung a silver moon-bow and quiver, lowering them three stories to Persephone.

Fully armed again, the Killer of Children told Natasha, "Collect the children. I will bar the Golden Door." Persephone dashed off, while Natasha did a head count, finding all the children were already together, gawking up at Eros, striding about atop their cage, wearing a light tunic and kilt, and hung like a demi-god, his golden crossbow slung across his back. As *Selene* reeled herself in, crewmen swarmed down the grapple line, attacking the gilded bars with hardened steel saws.

Natasha ran to tell Persephone the children were ready, finding nuns piling everything they could against the Golden Door. Men were already banging on the far side, angrily demanding entry. Having only one door was handy for keeping prisoners in, but it also made the Cage into a natural fortress, with the blank windowless third story rearing above the haram's rooftop gardens. But the D'Brovkniks knew all about bringing down fortresses, and Natasha heard the creak of wheels, followed by a bang that sent chairs and boxes flying off the barricade. They had wheeled a battering ram into the big entrance chamber with the cherubs, meaning to beat in the Golden Door.

Natasha returned to the courtyard in time to shoo children to safety as the first gilded bar came crashing down. It was a race now, between the battering ram at the Golden Door and the crewmen cutting into the cage. Even with only one bar down, the gap was wide enough for a child, and Alexi came sliding down on a sling. Eros had kept Persephone's promise to treat him like a regular boy — as D'Hay heir he would never have gone

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down the line into danger. And he reveled in it, helping load the smaller children one-by-one into the sling for the return trip.

Seeing she could leave the loading to others, Natasha went to tell Persephone, "One bar is down, and Eros is lifting out the children."

"Good," Persephone told her, "because the Golden Door is coming down." As she said it, the barricade gave a great heave, and half of it tumbled aside. Another booming crash, and gilded splinters shot across the room. Nuns looked on in anguish, telling their beads, knowing the D'Brovniks were coming through.

Another bang, and Natasha saw the Golden Door disintegrate in a cloud of splinters. Suddenly she could see into the chamber of the cherubs beyond, where men with axes chopped at what was left of the barricade, backed by Kazak archers surrounding Baron D'Brovnik and his ensign, both in full armor. Behind them loomed the huge battering ram, tipped with a giant steel fist. Kazak arrows zipped through the gap, scattering the nuns.

Persephone sent a single slim hypodermic shaft in reply — straight through the left eye-slit of Baron D'Brovnik's old-fashioned great helm.

Spinning about, the Killer of Children grabbed Natasha by the collar, dragging her through the little nunnery and into the courtyard, locking the door behind them. And the door to the bath as well — though in minutes D'Brovniks would break down the doors, or make their way in through the galleries. All the children were gone except for Alexi D'Hay — but the gap above was too small for anyone else. Natasha, Helena, and Persephone were still locked in the Gilded Cage. Axe men beat at the doors as Natasha looped the sling around Alexi, and saw him hoisted aloft. Exceedingly proud to be the last boy out of the Cage, Alexi called down to her, "I will tell Eros to hurry."

No need. As Alexi went up, the second bar down came down, nearly braining him on the way. Now they could get through, but the sling was around Alexi's waist, and they had to wait for him to be hoisted up, and the line to come back down, all the time listening to axes beating on splintering wood. When the sling came back, Natasha slid it around Helena, giving her a swift kiss, glad mother and baby would get away.

As they kissed, the bath house door flew off its hinges and men-at-arms burst into the courtyard, followed by Kazaks. There would be no return trip. This was the last sling load out, and not surprisingly it went

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to Helena. Natasha's true love lived a charmed life. Long given up for dead, Helena would be the one to get away, alive and free, carrying a baby that was heir to two baronies, while Natasha and the Killer of Children stayed to face some justifiably angry D'Brovniks. Oddly, Natasha would not have it any other way.

Nor Persephone either. Before Natasha could let go of Helena, Persephone seized both of them from behind, shouting, "Hold on!"

Natasha did, sliding an arm through the sling as the line suddenly took off, easily lifting the three of them. Looking down, Natasha saw surprised men's faces staring open-mouthed back at her. Archers raised their bows to fire, at a range where Kazaks could not miss. As they did, water came cascading down in their faces, blinding the bowmen and spoiling their arrows. Eros had released the grapple lines and dumped *Selene*'s water ballast, making the skyship shoot upward, dragging the sling up with it.

In seconds Natasha was drawn right up out of the Gilded Cage, like she was on a line headed straight to heaven, seeing the haram's rooftop gardens recede beneath her. Brovazamak lay spread out below, the haram and fortress-palace, the castle town, and the big bend in the Brovva cutting through the black earth steppe, all dwindling to doll-size below her. She was flying free, safe so long as no one let go.

Slowly the skyship's windlass reeled them up, then Eros and the mews boys hauled them aboard. Natasha found herself standing on *Selene*'s narrow deck, with Helena beside her, while the skyship floated effortlessly at her pressure height. Leaning idly against the port rail, humming a Persian love song, Eros noticed one of Persephone's arrows was missing, and asked, "Where did that shaft go?"

"Through Baron D'Brovnik's left eye-slit," replied Persephone evenly, sounding like it had slipped from her quiver.

Alexi oohed, and asked Natasha, "Did you see it?"

To which she nodded yes, hardly believing it now, but clearly remembering the shaft going in, and D'Brovnik's head jerking back, with the arrow's feathers sprouting from his armored face. Helena asked, "Then if this baby is a boy, is he the new Baron D'Brovnik?"

"Not yet." Persephone smiled at Helena's eagerness. "Baron D'Brovnik is a long way from dead."

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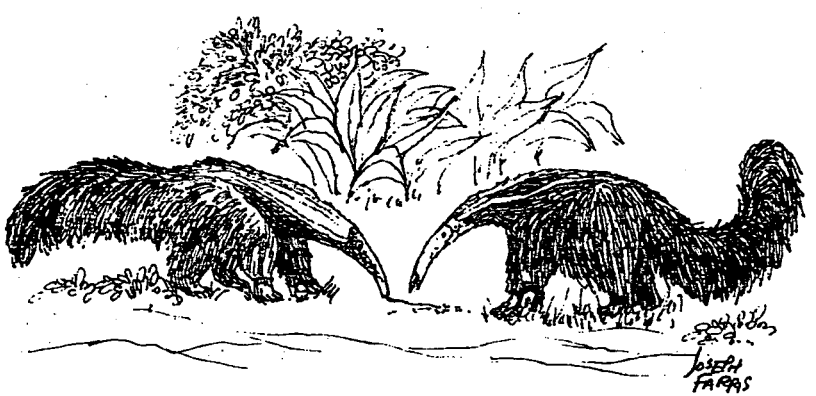
"But Natasha saw you shoot him!" Alexi insisted, wanting one dead enemy out of all this mayhem.

"Just with leprosy," Persephone protested. "Death has small use for Baron D'Brovnik — at the moment anyway — besides, I am just the Killer of Children. Men, I mostly leave to my sister. But only one eye and a virulent case of leprosy will slow the nervous baron down nicely, doing wonders for everyone." Baron D'Brovnik had far too much time on his hands, but soon it would be spent checking his fingers. Persephone went on to say they must sort through the children, "separating out those who have homes to return to from those we must find homes for."

Natasha nodded, guessing Alexi's days as an ordinary boy were numbered — but if he lived to be Lord D'Hay, his stay with the Killer of Children would not be forgotten. Seeing the children clustered together on the foredeck, ecstatic to be free and flying magically through the air, Natasha found they seemed strangely small to her, so fragile and different — yet short years ago she had been so solidly one of them. And now Helena had another child inside her, which was bound to make Natasha a foster mother as well. Teetering on the edge of adulthood, Natasha remembered Persephone's warning, that time was the true killer of children.



"I understand these are certified organic ants."

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

AIN'T HE UNGLAMOROUS

BACK IN THE day when movies were movies and Humphrey Bogart loved Lauren Bacall and cartoons were less than ten minutes long and ran before the feature, the appearance of comic book/strip characters on film was generally limited to Saturday morning serials that played to audiences of children. Now that a large majority of the American audience have, for all intents and purposes, been reduced to children, their critical faculties nearly obliterated by decades of real good blow-up and cartoonish scenarios, comic book heroes and villains zoom across the screens of the nation's theaters a half-dozen times a year in films with nine figure budgets and scripts churned out by an assembly-line process that might be as well served by the employment of chimpanzees rather than the doubtless far more impeccably tailored — yet no more gifted — writing "talent" that in fact does the actual typing. If there exists a comic book not currently in development, then surely it must be under option. We are already beginning to see remakes of comic book movies, the next in line being next year's *The Punisher*, which will likely be a better film than the 1989 version starring Dolph Lundgren...but probably only marginally better, and it will cost ten times as much to make. This year's comic feast has thus far included such ghastly menu items as *Daredevil* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, a relatively palatable X-Men sequel, and several overdone slabs of deafening Dolby-ized gunge (*T3*, *The Matrix: Reloaded*, et al) that, while not directly derived from comics, reference the comic book tradition. The difficulty with most such films, at

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least to my mind, has been that those charged with adapting these simplistic, violent stories have not taken into account the dynamics and demands of the medium to which they are being adapted. Instead of seeking to translate the stories, to imbue them with the heightened complexity and depth that would allow them to be cinematically compelling (as, most notably, Tim Burton did with *Batman*), their main goal has been to transfer them to film and thus perserve the materials as inked upon the page so as not to annoy the title character's fan base. This may or may not be a wise marketing decision, but it has certainly proved to be, generally speaking, a horrid artistic choice. So it was that when I learned Ang Lee *(Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon)* had signed on to direct *Hulk*, and that the part of Bruce Banner would be played by Eric Bana, whose striking work in the Australian film *Chopper* marked him as an actor to watch, I thought this combination of directorial and acting talent might be capable of creating a comic book film that would satisfy on every level.

I find it amusing that one of the more frequently voiced complaints about *Hulk* is that the Hulk himself does not look real. The celluloid version of Doc Bruce Banner's inner child seems considerably more real to me than does the print version, and I can't help but think that were a fifteen-foot-tall, green-skinned humanoid figure with limbs like oak trunks to materialize in the parking lot adjacent to my building and begin tossing cars about, or whatever suited his pleasure, he would look distinctly unreal by any standard. If truth be told, the Hulk is the most realistic element of Ang Lee's movie. Though the effects do not achieve the uniform brilliance of those in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, several sequences capture an equivalent magic — in particular, a long chase scene during which the Hulk, having escaped from captivity on a secret army base, is hunted through the desert by fighter jets and choppers, and, while running, discovers that he has a prodigious ability to leap. This scene and others are enhanced by split-screen effects designed to give the frames the look of comic book pages and are themselves enhanced by a variety of digital zooms, wipes, and dissolves. Images are spun, split, letterboxed, shunted to one side, etc. — this is one busy, busy motion picture. The overall effect is like having opened a comic book

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whose pages then come to life — though sometimes confusing, on the whole it's a stimulating and beautifully managed device. If they had used these techniques in *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, it would have been even more popular a miniseries.

The origin story of the Hulk has been scientifically upgraded, lent a smidgen more plausibility, by attributing Doc Bruce Banner's Hulking-out not merely to being belted by gamma rays, but mainly to self-experimentation done by his father, David Banner, while working on a military project dealing with regeneration. When the gamma rays finally strike Banner the Younger, they activate mutated genetic material that has been passed down to him from his father, and they further serve to amplify a rage born of childhood trauma, this stemming from a terrible domestic event involving his mother that Bruce has blacked out and is fragmentarily revealed during the course of the film. Said trauma has made Bruce, according to his ex-girlfriend Betty Ross, "emotionally distant," a charge that strikes an odd note given the emotionally distant fashion in which Jennifer Connelly establishes the role — she displays throughout a gloomy stupefaction overlaid by what seems a valium-induced calm. For the most part, Bana offers little contrast; only when he's beginning to change into the Hulk does he exhibit strong emotion. Sam Elliott, as Betty's father, General "Thunderbolt" Ross, is appropriately, gruffly martial. He was the head of the project on which David Banner worked and knows something of Bruce's secret. Nick Nolte, as the elder incarnation of David Banner, who returns into his son's life after more than twenty years' incarceration, is not to blame for the unevenness of his performance — that blame and, indeed, blame for the majority of the movie's significant problems, must be attributed to the script, to writers of record John Turman, Michael France, and James Schamus, and to the god-knows-how-many-other trade rats who took their turn gnawing at its edges. As it's written, Nolte's character alternates between that of a deeply troubled obsessive and that of a hamfisted evil guy, and no substantial logical support is given for either condition. As a result, it's tough to discern the path that led David Banner from his misguided scientist phase to the cosmically demented supervillain — the Absorbing Man — whom he ultimately

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becomes. Not that such a road is required by the dictates of the basic story, but Ang Lee, by virtue of both his reputation and his leisurely approach, seems to promise us one and thus its absence comes as something of a letdown.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong in beginning what is essentially an action picture with forty minutes of character development; but if you're hoping to please an action audience — any audience, for that matter — you'd best make said development good and dramatic. The lugubrious exchanges of dialogue between Bana and Connelly that dominate the first third of the film are marked by a flatness that makes the Mojave look like a mountain range. For the life of me, I can't remember a thing they talked about; not a single line had sufficient pungency to linger in my memory. The interjection of a minor league villain/potential romantic rival, a smarmy corporate pirate played with an Oil Can Henry-ish lack of shading by Josh Lucas (last seen smirking at Reese Witherspoon in *Sweet Home Alabama*), does absolutely nothing in the way of striking a spark, even though it's his unrelenting no-goodness that eventually pushes Bruce's badass button. By the time Bana morphed into the Grumpy Green Giant, I was reduced to wondering whether Jennifer Connelly's moist-eyed somnolence was a directorial choice or the result of mild flu; to hope that the mountain bike-riding Bruce would hit the mother of all gopher holes, take a terrible spill, and subsequently lay green-fisted waste to all the little forest creatures; and to speculate that Ang Lee might have decided to do a Zen thing and film the first superhero movie in which the central figure was merely thought about and never seen.

Once the Hulk puts in an appearance, the pace of the movie switches gears with alarming suddenness. It's rather like watching a car that's been idling at a stoplight for the better part of an hour, while its occupants chat about interesting topics like their favorite brand of paint thinner, abruptly peel away from the intersection, downshifting, swerving, ramming into garbage cans, roaring past plot points, *whoosh*, with only Jennifer Connelly gazing out the passenger side window with her lovely gray eyes and dovelike gray composure to remind us, I suppose, that it's all so very sad and slow and we're really going nowhere, don't you know.... A gradual build would have been

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preferable, but once the film gets up to speed, there are plenty of good moments as the Hulk is captured, escapes, smashes stuff, gets recaptured, all leading to his final battle with the Absorbing Nick Nolte, looking here as ratty and forlorn as he did in his famous mug shot. Special mention should be made of the scene in which the Hulk hitches a ride on the rear of a fighter jet, whose pilot flies up into the troposphere in hopes of rendering the Big Green Guy unconscious. As they fly higher and higher, the Hulk's monstrous visage grows to fill the canopy above the pilot's head and that face, barely conscious, eyebrows frosted, registers with us in the cool and poignant way that only great comic book imagery can, here lent the added potency of motion and the semblance, however unreal it may be judged, of life. I won't go so far as to say that moment alone is worth the price of admission — ten bucks should still buy more value than that — but it does go to show what might have been done with this property had someone other than Messers Schamus, France, and Turman been handed control over it.

And, of course, someone other than Mr. Lee.

I've been told that when Ang Lee was aproached by studio people to direct *Hulk*, he responded that he didn't know if he could make a good comic book movie, but he did know how to make a good Greek tragedy. Unfortunately, he made neither one, and perhaps the fact that he thought he knew how to make a Greek tragedy should have disqualified him for the job. Even the Hulk, among the darkest of the Marvel heroes, has about him an innate silliness, a humorous aspect (He's a green muscle freak who's capable of bouncing like super-Super Mario from the bottom of a well to the top of Mt. Everest, for God's sakes!) that Lee apparently failed to notice, a quality that demands something less declamatory than the Classical treatment. There is about Lee's movie an unmistakable whiff of pomposity, and that attitude, along with the characterlessness of the dialogue, doomed *Hulk* to be not so much a smash as a dull, disjointed thump. It turns out that what was needed to transform Bruce Banner into a monstrous green symbol of the beast within was not a tragedian, but someone who — though they might be conversant with the mechanisms of Greek tragedy — knew a little more than did Lee about Saturday morning serials.

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Rand Lee has been working steadily on a fantasy novel entitled Morningfall *and says he is nearing completion on it. In the interim, he manages to write a new story every two or three years. His first story for this young century is part of his ongoing sf series about interactions between humans and the alien D'/fy. These stories may seem a bit challenging at first, but they're well worth the initial effort.*

Coming of Age Day

By Rand B. Lee

1.

IN THE ARMS OF HIS FATHER, the boy Cather dreams of his mother, and wakes in a cold yearning sweat to find himself strangling on his sibling's tail. Somehow, during sleepwatch, Flet/jèjno/Lìlyo/fy has managed to turn itself completely around in the cradle of their father's arms; and Flet's tail, seeking anchorage, has found Cather's throat. Struggling for breath, tearing ineffectually with his nailless hands at the encircling appendage, Cather acknowledges rather bitterly that he has always envied Flet its tail, since he has none. It is a glorious tail: prehensile, muscular, coal black (Cather has seen coal, in the mineral stores), streaked with oxygenated aortal blue. When combed out, it makes a great fluffy fan capable of covering Cather's entire chest; braided by Cather's nimble five-fingered hands, it can put out an eye.

Help! Help! Cather cries, using the secondary vocal cords in his upper chest, for his primary vocal cords are not much use with their airway

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squeezed flat. But Cather is part Human, and his D'/fy secondaries are poor flabby things as yet; the subsonics they generate are weak. Flet, deep asleep, does not hear. As the red mist rises before his eyes, Cather wonders if everybody will be sorry when he is gone; if Ship will declare a Mourning; if the septet to which Cather and Flet have belonged since their births will elect to disband rather than seek a replacement for him; if his lifeless body will be placed beside that of his mother in cryostorage on Firstdeck. So entertained is Cather by these images that he is interested to observe (from a distance, through the gathering mist, and as though they belong to someone else) that his arms and legs are flailing wildly; and when his right foot, driven by his powerful D'/fy leg-muscles, finds the bank of sensitive scent-glands lining the inside of his sib's left thigh, Cather barely feels the impact.

Flet roars in its sleep, beginning to rouse. Its tail whips away from Cather's neck, hardens, sharpens, then slashes him across the face, opening his cheek. "Stop! Stop!" gasps Cather. Bubbles of his hybrid blood mist the air of the nest. "Stop, thou great turd! Thou wilt slay me sure!" For Flet's young First Cycler brain is still thrashing up through the six stages of D'/fy sleep, and until its higher centers engage, its defensive-offensive subroutines will not cease. Again its tail whips out, raking Cather's left shoulder. Cather screams with both sets of vocal cords, punches the warm membrane confining him and his sib. "Father" *Father* "help!" *help!*

All at once the webbing-sac collapses, and the children bounce into the freefall of the vast crèchedeck. Flailing, they carom off one another, neighboring nest-membranes, and the floor before Ship, alerted by the presence of Cather's misted blood, extrudes restraints to snag and immobilize them. And by this time their father, Maknàdo/vevbròta/Tÿmyta/fy, is winging its way toward them from across the cabin.

Chiseled silver face glaring down at them from its muscular neck, mane of glorious silver D'/fy hair floating out around its rippled shoulders, Maknàdo's disappointment is immense, its sorrow even more so, and its shame greatest of all. "For this wert thou Awakened, child of warriors?" Maknàdo roars to an ashen-eared Flet. "To smear thy nest-sib into nutrient paste with thy great extravagant tail? *Well*? Explain thyself, for surely we must explain in our turn to all those whose slumber is disturbed

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by thy perturbations!" Flet, now fully awake and in full realization of what it has done, sobs incoherently, misting the air with the tears from its huge eyes, leaking reconciliation-triggers from every silver-furred pore. But Maknàdo is implacable.

"Thou hast grown overproud, y'Flet," it growls, "overproud of thy strength and swiftness, and clearly thou hast thought these things enough. But more there is to the warrior's way than these things. The warrior must bear all things in discipline. The warrior must consider all things in serenity. The warrior must temper all actions with due regard for conservation of resources inner and outer. Even slumbering, the warrior must not lose mindfulness. And to lose mindfulness while in the Family nest!" It bows its magnificent head, and its flow of words ceases.

As Flet launches into the long, convoluted apology required by D'/fy etiquette (Hundred and Third Attitude, The Youth Ashamed), Cather considers confessing the groin-kick that has been his contribution to the mêlée, but he decides he is enjoying his sibling's discomfiture far too much to interrupt. Of late his admiration for his sib has been increasingly spoiled by a deep and piercing envy: of its tail; of its strength; of its perfect control over its secondary vocal cords; of its linking-cells. Cather, too, possesses linking-cells, engineered of altered D'/fy DNA, the same linking-cells that Flet has used to make its tail-tip a razor and Maknàdo has employed to wrap their sleeping-sac and grow freefall wings. But Cather, though the same age as Flet and, like him, a First Cycler, has no conscious control yet over his linking-cells; and since he is unique among the Family, nobody knows what percentage of pure D'/fy linking cell combinations they may be capable of. *Different*, he thinks bitterly. *I'm Different, that's all. For all we know I'll be a Firster for the rest of my life.*

Flet has stopped talking. "Peace, now, y'Flet," Maknàdo is saying. "Ordered thou art, now; ordered and in proper relationship," the Mànafut term being *y'nèsto-y'nèvyaco*, literally, self as-is equivalent to self as-might-possibly-become-in-all-probability-lines. "Embrace now thy sib in loving harmony." Which Flet does, moistly, while in his secret heart Cather burns.

* * *

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2. EXCERPT FROM THE PRIVATE JOURNAL OF DAME CATHERIN CASTLETON, AUGUST 30, 2162, 13:05 PM GMT:

Apparently the D'/fy have solved the problems they were having with the amino acid balance in its nutrient environment, for the child now grows like a weed in Maknàdo's pseudowomb. I find myself curiously interested in the little creature's progress. I don't know why I should be; there is almost nothing of me in it — just a few scraps of genetic material, harvested from my ossified ovaries. But really, it is so ugly it is endearing. It looks like a pig that has been crossed with a fetal pony that has been crossed with my son, Tony, whom fortunately I shall never have to endure the sight of again. In fact, it looks very much like the Tenniel illustration of the pig-baby in *Alice*. The D'/fy tell me it will seem much more Human when it is finished than it does at present, but I am not sure that that will be an improvement.

Maknàdo is still worried for it. Although the child possesses the full range of D'/fy scent-glands, it seems its smells are still wrong, a terrible problem: What if Ship refuses to recognize the creature as one of its own, and decides to abort the entire procedure? Ship can do this, apparently. It nearly overrode the D'/fy decision to initiate contact with Earth last century, and it came perilously close to refusing entry to our boarding party when the First Expedition finally docked after eight years in space. Though Véveto/hahànno/Unèsta/fy, who convinced Ship to accept our Net apparatus, assures me Ship has grown to like Humans much better than it did when it first met us.

The D'/fy speak of Ship as though it were alive; but then, they speak of everything as though it were alive. "Bloody bunch of star-abos," Elaine Goolagong used to call them. Poor Elaine. She was the only Human female on the First Expedition I could stand. Her mother was the one who deciphered the original D'/fy radio band transmission, and Elaine always labored in the shadow of her fame. I was so sorry to hear that she had killed herself.

I wonder if the child will think of me after I am dead. Since I will probably not live to witness the baby's first birthday, none of this should matter to me. Yet I find that it does, terribly. This child will be the first

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Human being in history to understand what it is like to be a D'/fy from the inside, and it is carrying *my* genes, *mine*.

The WHO is demanding that the D'/fy permit a psych team to visit me from Earth. The ostensible reason is my welfare; His Majesty's government has been most concerned for their newly damed Castleton. The real reason is that they suspect we are up to something and want to find out what it is. But the D'/fy have agreed. Want to pump the team for information about Human child psychology, I expect, since there is only so much they can learn from observing me, retarded adolescent though I am. I managed to avoid social contact with the Ninth and Tenth Expeditions, and the D'/fy were kind enough to keep them well away from this part of Ship; I do not know what my hosts told my fellow-Humans, but at any rate nobody sent for me. I suspect it is because the expedition-members were all fixated on the new venture, this Interspecies Contact Station they and the D'/fy are planning to build halfway between Earth and Rigel Kent.

This time around, however, I will not be able to avoid the psych squad. I wonder if I am up to it. Have I forgotten how to lie? The D'/fy cannot lie, and I have not had social intercourse with a fully Human being in over a year. Lord put a watch over my mouth, Big Ben if possible.

What kind of Human will the child be, I wonder? We do not know this any more than we know what kind of D'/fy it will be. It has the linking-cells, even the ones in its brain; God knows what that makes it capable of. But it does not have them everywhere, as the true D'/fy do. Its bones are far less rich in them than its internal organs. This worries me. What little the D'/fy have confirmed about their life-cycles — I have identified seven, so far — has made it obvious that each involves considerable morphological change. Will the child, with its less flexible skull and skeleton, be able to adapt to them without repeated surgeries?

Perhaps I have not mentioned that we have decided its initial gender. I didn't want it to have any gender at all, but the D'/fy, having studied psych texts, firmly vetoed this; androgynes die young in Human cultures. Instead they have grown it into a herm, possessing fully functional male and female genitalia. Its first eighteen years, however, will be as a male-identificant, since the hormonal surges and aggression responses of Human male adolescents approximate those experienced by D'/fy First

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Cyclers. It will also have a sibling, with whom it is already bonding *in utero*. This was a surprise; the D'/fy were keeping it from me, a birthday present.

Ah, God. Whatever the child is, it will not be like us. I have perhaps eight Earth-months left to live.

How I wish I were not dying. I bullied my way onto the First Expedition, pulling every string I had, determined, with my stupid poet's idealism, to rescue the greatest event in the life of the Human race from the banality of pure scientific objectivity. How obnoxious I was to poor Drusilla in my aesthetic fervor. "We have a visual on them!" she said excitedly, as I stepped off the shuttle at Woomera. "They're humanoid, just as their maths said they would be. And furred, with large, nearly lemurlike eyes. But that doesn't truly convey — "

"No! No!" I think I actually raised my hands in horror. "*Don't* bias me! I wish to encounter them with an *absolutely* fresh gaze!"

"But I've made them sound like chimpanzees." I waved her away. So she gave up, and simply ushered me into the ready room, where Thresk (I know now it was Thresk), conversing via timelagged, black-and-white skiplink with the WHO umpty-umps, was projected on the wall-size Netscreen. I stood stock still, overcome with wonder at the harsh, almost masculine facial planes; at the wide brow and high forehead; at the short, light facial fur exploding in a glorious gleaming silver lion's mane about the vast shoulders; at the wide flat Negroid nose, binostrilled like ours; at the wide, upthrusting, concave, batlike ears; at the thin-lipped, toothless, hard-gummed mouth; no visible Adam's apple. And the hands: six-fingered, each finger nailless, slightly spatulate at the tip, strangely jointed, and constantly in motion.

But, oh! The eyes! Large indeed — double the size of a Human's — and as such offputting had it not been for their deep, mild, receptive (rather than penetrating) intelligence. White-balled like ours, triply irised in gradations of gold, yet slightly milky (I thought of cataracts, only later learning of the D'/fy's transparent triple eyelids). Long, almost feminine eyelashes; no eyebrows. It saw me, then, and it smiled at me. Not with its lips, of course; only Firsters possess the modified snarl-grimace we call a smile. With those eyes.

I burst into tears, of course, only barely conscious of the indulgent

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looks on the faces of the scientists, government shills, and military personnel standing round about. They, whom in my pseudointellectual arrogance I had dismissed as cretins sight unseen, knew all about it, having each experienced the same reaction herself.

Maknàdo had promised me the child would have D'/fy eyes. And it does. I would have aborted it, else.

3. ON THE GAMINGFLOOR

On the Gamingfloor, the Firster septets from Cather's crèchehall are training. None of them have morphed into Seconders yet, though there is an electricity in the air that portends Change soon; and Ship has turned up the gravities, so everybody gets a chance to run around and enjoy the push and thrust of muscles under pressure.

In Flet's septet, Flet has been assigned to play Union of Opposites with Cather, because they are sibs and Cather is Different. Before they begin, Flet passes on to Cather — with the pride of recent acquisition — the knowledge that null-gee, though fun for sleeping and sex and flying, is bad for the bones. "Bones are the semirigid structures within us to which our muscles attach," says Flet. "We all have them. They show us that we come from *planets*, long ago; and that space is not our first home. Null-gee makes the bone-stuff weak. Too weak for *planet*fall." Its eyes shine. It is Flet's great dream to visit Earth, an enthusiasm that Cather, fearing his own Humanness, does not share.

"Am I three watches from the womb?" snaps Cather. "Begin the Opposition!"

"Let it begin, then." They circle one another, locking gazes. Playful mockery in its eyes, Flet purses its lips in a D'/fy grin. "Thou art small, my sib," it taunts, "but thou art not wise." *First Challenge: verbal.*

"Thou art not small, my sib, but thou *thinkest* thyself wise," retorts Cather, glaring. *Second Challenge.*

"Thou art smaller than I, but not as wise as I." *Third Challenge.* A mild look, to match its tone. *Insolent, insolent,* thinks Cather.

"Thy smallest part is not as wise as my largest part." *Fourth Challenge,* Cather.

"My largest part is wiser than thy smallest part." *Fifth Challenge,*

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Flet. It begins to hum the Hum of Incipient Altercation, inviting Cather to take first strike. Cather bounds forward, kicking out as he does so. Flet is gone, just like that. Cather whirls. Humming, Flet shoves its brother backward: once, twice, thrice, using its superior reach to stay just outside Cather's swing-range. "Strike, sib, strike!" it calls. "Strike! Why art thou not striking?" Cather grabs Flet by the left arm and drops back, pulling Flet slightly off-balance. Then he wraps his legs around Flet's middle and unloads a barrage of curses from his sematophores. The stench engulfs them both.

Gasping, Flet pulls away, nictitating membranes sliding into place over its sensitive eyes. Cather, extra lids already in place, hoots gasping laughter in his turn. He has been wheedling extra sulphur from Ship for several weeks, preparing for this moment. "Thou scum-sucking turdling!" cries Flet in mock-anger. The stench is really a masterpiece.

"Yield thyself, sib!" shouts Cather. "Yield, and so turn the Challenge!"

"Never!" cries his sib, and leaps.

And spreads new wings.

And flies.

"What? What?" Cather cries [*Sà? Sà?* ejaculatory form of *sÿ*, First Stage Mànafut linking-particle denoting wonder, horror, amazement, amusement, depending on context, tonals, and vowel-shift]. Gamesward claps its four big hands and skirmishes cease all over the field. Mouths open; long, furred necks crane.

The shout goes up first from Cather and Flet's five crèchemates: clever Frèlkip, sweet Mèstipa, deft Bÿnjyk, randy Hlèlever, agemates all, known to Cather in sight and smell and sound and muscle-feel and limb-writhe and heartbeat since his first knowing: "y'Flet! y'Flet! y'Flet!" It is taken up by the next septet, dancing Dèvved's; and the next, led by Vèssesh the [normally] silent; and the next, and the next. "y'Flet! y'Flet! y'Flet!" The Gamingfloor resounds. And above it, floating in silvered majesty, leaking joy from every sematophore, excited nanos buzzing in golden clouds around it, Flet/jèjno/Lìlyo/fy — now Flet/jèjno/*Dyènye*/fy —soars. Flet's braided tail, tip newly healed, nearly clunks Cather on the head on its way to the floor.

Then Mèstipa explodes in mane, rainbowed, oceanic. Hlèlever writhes,

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flowers erupting from throat and chest and armpits. Bÿnjyk splits down the middle, silver fur fusing into turquoise scales, then puffing back into fur again as the new Seconder exerts its new-coined will. All across the Gamingfloor, warrior Firsters are shuddering with their Change into Seconder metamorphs, tails falling off right and left, while Gamesward races amongst them, embracing, reassuring, shouting encouragement.

All, that is, except Cather, who lost his tail long ago. And Cather flees, shrieking, in utterly hominid despair.

4. EXCERPT FROM THE PRIVATE JOURNAL OF DAME CATHERIN CASTLETON, 12 JUNE, 2163, 1:05 AM GMT:

They brought it in person to me today as I lay here in my coffin. I am entirely paralyzed now, except for my eyes, respiration, and vocal apparatus, though thanks to Ship, there is no pain, only a floating feeling. That, and an occasional intolerable urge to scratch my nose. Ship feeds me intravenously, and feeds me well. I am never hungry or thirsty. Still, I dream of chocolate, and wish I could taste it one more time before oblivion. Impossible, of course; my stomach, as such, succumbed to the supercancer long ago. But still.

The Twentieth Expedition said good-bye earlier. They do not know about the child, of course. One by one they filed in, like Irishmen at a wake. Captain Roos-Jensen was very chatty. Construction on Concord Station has begun. The D'/fy have opened their starlogs to the linguists, and Roos-Jensen's voice shook with delight as she described what little they had come to find out. "*Dozens* of civilizations," she told me. "*Scores* of them. Maybe *thousands*. Hard to say; the logs aren't strictly scientific, if you know what I mean." She winked when she said this. Ah, how well I know. The D'/fy are dreamers, first and foremost. They have been dreaming since the dawn of time, dreaming of us, it seems, of creatures like us, that is to say, of creatures like themselves. In their flight from their masters, millennia ago, they were flying not only away, but also flying toward. Us. And they have always known it.

I am sorry for the child, I find, having gazed face to face upon its nearly

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supernatural ugliness (excepting its eyes — always excepting its glorious angel eyes). Oh, it is alien enough for the Net, I suppose, should the Net ever discover its — his — existence. It possesses a vestigial tail, which they tell me will soon drop off, much sooner than it will for its D'/fy sibling; finger- and toe-webbing; little purple gills, which they say will be fully functional into adulthood; strange shiny skin, like a porpoise's only already dense with hair; ridiculous flappy ears (really, the D'/fy should do something about those ears!); and that big cranium, already no doubt aswim with strange hybrid thoughts. The baby is fully conscious at less than one Shipday old. They didn't have to tell me that; I could see the look on its face when it poked its head out from Maknàdo's translucent carrying pouch and took a gander at me for the first time. It looked as horrified as I felt. Poor Maknàdo seemed tired. It would not let me see the sib.

They have all gone, now, so that my final visitor may come to me and I may die in peace. It is a great relief. I had always read that loved ones hold back a dying person, and it is true. If I were D'/fy, my agemates would devour me as I died; but Ship fears, I think, that I would give Her indigestion, so She is going to display me in a time-anomaly for future generations to vomit over. How very lower middle class.

Who knows? I might be back. What little I have been able to comprehend of D'/fy theology appears to resemble some of the tenets of Buddhism and Hinduism: everything is change; peace is acceptance, not resistance; we never die, but are merely transformed, all that twaddle. Acceptance indeed! Was it acceptance that drove them into space? They are anything but passive. The D'/fy never lie, they claim; to call a D'/fy a liar is the greatest imaginable insult: it drives them wild. But no one has thought to ask them if they always tell the truth.

I see my executioner has come at last, so I will end this recording. My son, my daughter, whatever you are, when you view this in your elder days, have pity on your poor mother. I did not do my best for you; I did not think of you at all, really, but only of my need for union with these blessed people, my yearning to belong at last to something greater than myself and my wretched Humanity. So do not grieve for me, or wish you had known me, or love me. I am quite sure, now, that I have never loved you.

For you are too Human, my dear. It is not your alienness that fills me

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with disgust when I looked upon you, but your Humanity. Whatever strange blood courses now through your hybrid veins, you bear the stamp, the unmistakable stamp, of the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve. And I hate everything Human.

Ah. How nice of you to drop by. I have been expecting you. Let's get it done.

Castleton out.

5. IN THE WELL

Anguished, afraid, Cather falls down the nullgrav well. *I will never Change; never!* he thinks. *Never! Never!* The well is clogged as usual with the traffic of those Awake: *Lìlyoy* Firsters, from crèchehalls other than his own (one big youngling, glands bulging, giving everybody within tail's reach sexpokes); *Dyènyey* Seconders *(Like Flet! Like Flet!)*, new to their swift, compact bodies, shapeshifting as they plunge just for the joy of it; a gaggle of *Nuplàstay* Thirder empaths with pain on their faces, deep in recall of their past incarnations; *Unèstay* Fourthers, geometrician-specialists by the sound of it, arguing math-politics with hands, mouths, and scent-glands; and every now and then, a quiet *Tÿmytay* Fifther teacher like Thresk, falling with dignity. No *Shòryay* hermits, but this does not surprise him; Sixthers rarely use the well.

Nor do the *Ÿryey*, of course. Seventh Cyclers, the Smallest Ones, ancient D'/fy in their final life-Change, do not normally make visits to the crèche areas, or use the well, or the tubs, or the groves, or the common grounds, or the rutpits. They do not break bread with the community, or cast their songs through the scent network binding the Family together both Awake and Asleep. He has never seen an *Ÿry*, nor does he know anyone who has, except his father and Thresk, and they will not speak of them. (*Ÿry* from *ÿr*, a particle indicating throughness, aboveness, beyondness; plus *y*, self; in plural, *-yey*, i.e., those-set-apart-from-Us.)

When once Cather had asked his parent Maknàdo what the *Ÿryey* did all Cycle, Maknàdo had replied, "Remake the world" (*Vee'y*, All-That-Is, *ste'stè'olelet*, present indicative of *stèly*, to build, to construct, to grow on). Which had told Cather precisely nothing. "Not-theres," Cather's sib Flet has called them, there being whispers in the ranks, "those who dwell

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in the deepest core of Ship and never venture forth." There was a time when Cather could not have imagined what it was like to be one of them, to be so set apart from everyone else.

Yet now, Cather, falling, finds himself thinking of the *Ÿryey*, and an enormous sadness possesses him. His eyes, leaking tears, attract nanos which, glittering, settle lapping upon his lips, cheeks, eyelids. (Nothing on Ship is wasted.) *Oh, Flet!* he thinks. *How beautiful thou art with the high air in thy wings! Thou art lost to me, now, lost; thy form, so sweet to me; thy voice, so familiar; thy silly stupid fond ways — all will be Changed, with those of our agemates, and I will be alone in the crèche.* It is an unbearable thought; unsupportable; and for the first time in his short life Cather conceives of suicide, an act for which no word exists in Mànafut at all.

A Thirder, brimming with empathy, catches at his arm; Cather pulls away savagely, spins into a burly Fourther, stammers his pardon, grabs a passing servo, yells one unheard-of command to it, and nearly has his arm jerked from its socket as the servo responds to the urgency in his voice and drags him, streaking, downwell. From the scarlet of the Firster level shaft he passes into the orange of Seconder, then the gold of Thirder, then the deep and Dreaming emerald of Fourther. The crowds shift (fewer Firsters, then some, then none but he), jerk away from the acid keening of his sematophores. Clots of nanos melt like mist, penetrated by the swiftness of his descent. By the time he and the servo reach the turquoise of Fifther level, all Ship knows that he alone of all Maknàdo's crèche has not Changed into a fluid-bodied Seconder.

There are no crowds here; Fifthers do not use the Well. In the dim blue silence the servo, gibbering ultrasonics, finally manages to assert its self-preservation subroutines, slapping filters over its scent-intakes and braking their descent. *No!* Cather shrieks in sematophore-talk. *No! No!* The servo shudders one last time, then its machine will dissolves. They fall faster. He half-expects crowds of Fifthers to emerge from their habitat-bays, surround him, stop him by sheer weight of numbers; but nothing happens: only the silent fall down the near-empty shaft, while the light dims toward the indigo of Level Six.

As they pass into the country of the Sixer teachers, Ship acts. Too late Cather sees the vast wide net of webbing, stretching below him in the

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shadows. He and the servo impact it at such velocity that they are nearly crushed by the sides of the tunnel their momentum makes of it; then it closes around them, and they are caught fast, their kinetic energy instantly absorbed, his limbs wrapped and stilled. The servo squawks once. And there they hang in the indigo dimness.

For a long time nothing else happens. Cather wonders briefly if Ship will decide he is more trouble than he is worth, and order him ejected into space, lest his recycled hybrid flesh prove contaminating to those who would consume it. But no nanos appear to neutralize his scent; no *tÿmytay* materialize to soothe and lecture him; no Thresk taps him on the shoulder with soft-faced concern. Slowly his anguish banks, and an incomprehensible calm comes over him. His eyes, far keener than a Human's, begin to take in his surroundings. The walls of the ancient shaft are free here of the kiosks and niches and artworks and squatter-bubbles that cake the upper commerce-levels; here they are bare to their original surfaces, though much scarred and pitted. As his gaze sweeps the side of the shaft, he realizes with a start that the scars on the walls are not random. There are patterns in them.

They are words, child.

From everywhere the voice seems to come; Cather gasps, twists in the webbing, sniffs, listens, then, startled, gawks. For floating in the dimness not a wing's distance from him, floating where nothing had been floating moments previously, is the smallest D'/fy he has ever seen. It is half his size, translucent, lit by a glow from within; he can look into its body and trace the organs, the shadow of a skeleton, memories of fur. Wings above it has, and wings below, and seven faces, not just one. And by this he knows that the *Ÿryey* have heard the yearning of his heart, and have come to him.

Look at the words, child. Hovering, it points its many hands. *Read them, and speak what thou readest.*

He looks, and despairs. Above, below, around him the great walls stretch, their markings branching, interweaving, chill. "Smallest Ones, I cannot read them," he whispers miserably. "I am too Human."

Nay, child. Thou art just Human enough. Whereupon the *Ÿry* reaches out its hands, reaches out and into his skull, and softly turns it on.

Light explodes within him, racing down the track of his spine like the

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fires all Shipborn dread. His head turns to knives, crystalline, dismayed, and each knife is a word. His ears burn as the linking-cells in his brain remold his timpani. His thighs run like rivers, sematophore-profligate. His throat throbs, then widens with a jerk of writhing muscle-fibers. Suddenly it is as though he has spent his life deaf and voiceless, for all around him the walls cry out with shelves and valleys and pits of voicesong and scentsong, voices the existence of which he has never before even suspected, and he can hear and smell them all. For the wall-markings speak: interweaving arms, legs, tails; gesticulating hands; hooting laughter; rumbling subsonics of staggering complexity; song-hums of piercing beauty, prismatic fur colors, bank upon bank of luscious, lambent scent.

He can hear and smell and understand them all, and oh joy! He can *speak* them all: histories, mythologies, sciences, visions, slave-chants from the Homeworld days; Diaspora genealogies, *Vevbròta* war-chants, hero-tales from the Reformation Era; love-songs from the world-seeding period; all the long yearning of a race of wanderers, seeking creatures just like itself. And he sings, in all four modes of Mànafut at once:

Mother! Word-knower! Thou art my wings!
Comprehending at last the shape his Change has taken.

6. NETCOM TRANSMISSION, PRIVATE, BEN BRINKER, EXOPSYCHOLOGIST, TWENTY-NINTH EXPEDITION PSYCH ASSESSMENT TEAM, TO LEONARD FLEMING, AGRONOMIST, CONCORD STATION DEVELOPMENT STAFF, 15 JUNE, 2181, 11:34 A.M. GMT:

I met the child today, Len. The D'/fy parent, Maknàdo, selected me the moment I stepped from the Commerce Level airlock. I was embarrassed as hell; we're a team, after all, and I'm very near to being the junior member. I thought at first it was a mistake. So did Olafsdottir. But the servo that came buzzing up was quite emphatic. After sniffing all our armpits it directed me, in perfect English, to follow it. When Olafsdottir protested, it politely told her to shut up and return to the docking bay with the rest of the team. Then it repeated, "Follow me, please," and we set out together.

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I felt very small and alone. Sweetheart, the Ship is tremendous, mind-boggling, a planet; seven planets, actually, layered like strata. An enormous humming dance of a city. I can't begin to describe how thrilled I am to be experiencing it in person, from the inside. Mom's big dream for me. The servo led me through the Human compound (now in disassembly, since we're all being moved to Concord Station), then down a corridor lush with plant growth into a small bay where the child stood waiting, flanked by two of the D'/fy. The smaller of the two, who had extremely beautiful eyes and what I might call a slightly feminine or maternal presence, introduced itself as Maknàdo/vevbròta/Tÿmyta/fy, the child's alien parent. The larger of the purebred D'/fy introduced itself as Flet/jèjno/Dyènye/fy, Maknàdo's other offspring. It had a booming voice and big muscles, quite a solid and concrete presence, but I could have sworn when I first laid eyes on it that it had *six* fingers on each hand. Later, however, I noticed that it had only five. (I must remember that size-values among the D'/fy are precisely opposite of those among most Human societies, smaller size being a sign of physiological and spiritual maturation and therefore indicative of higher community status.)

The hybrid was the last to speak, first in English, introducing itself as Cather/jèjno/Dyènye/Catherinson/fy, its lithe arms moving as adroitly as those of its parent and sibling. Then (to my delight) it launched into a welcoming speech in Middle English (I did not recognize the text and it may have been an original composition), closing (by this time my jaw had dropped) with an exquisite haiku in Early West Saxon! Lenny, how it knew that primitive English forms are my hobby I have no idea. It has no teeth, by the way, just those baleen-like structures the D'/fy use for chewing food. No visible genitals, either, though it assured me, without the slightest show of embarrassment, that it possesses fully functional sets of both male and female Human organs, plus the full complement of Damànakippith/fy sematophores, which I could not see through its fur.

It is subtly, disturbingly Human. One can see in its angular face the sensitivity of its Human DNA-donor, the famous poet Catherin Castleton; one can see her, too, in the curve of its neck, the color of its irises, and the humor that lingers around the edges of its Human-lipped mouth. But the shape of its head, the nimbus of mane, the wide shoulders and chest, and

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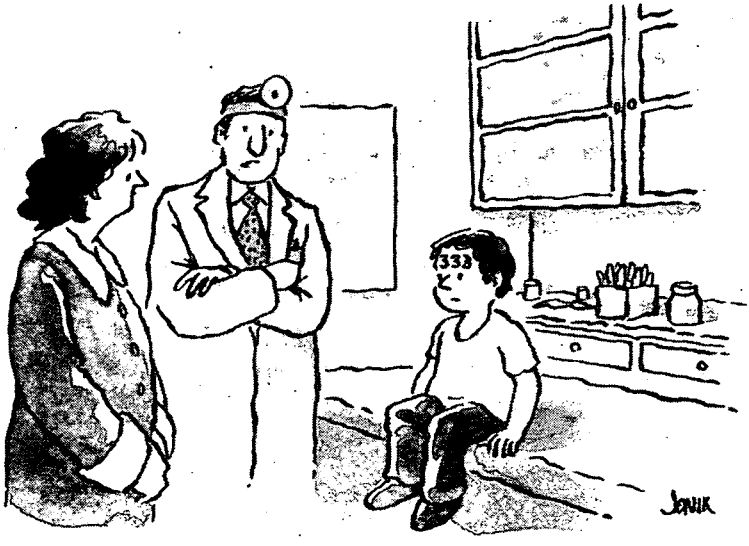
the back-jointed knees are pure D'/fy. Two-legged centaurs, Olafsdottir calls them, which makes no sense until you see them up close.

I was instantly taken by Cather's voice. All the D'/fy I've met have attractive voices, rich in subvocals and mellifluously nuanced, but Cather's is enthralling beyond words to describe. At the mere sound of it I felt myself moving into an undefinable emotional space, something like the peacefulness I feel after really great sex with you. Thank God I'll be seeing you at Concord Station next week. I've had *raging* erections since I first arrived here. Even Olafsdottir is affected by it; she goes around with a permanently red face. Note possible hypnotic influences here, pheromonally enhanced. (But why? And how? D'/fy pheromones shouldn't trigger a response in Humans at all.)

There's something about this child, Cather, whom I am trained to make my study for the rest of my life. As its mother was speaker for all Humanity to the D'/fy, so Cather will speak for the D'/fy to all Humanity. And oh my good God, Lenny, how he speaks to me.

I'm frightened.

Ben out. ☟



"I wouldn't worry too much. It's just the mark of impishness."

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Vered Tochterman was born in Argentina in 1970 and raised in Israel, where he still lives. He works as a translator and edits the magazine Dreams in Aspamia *(which translates to something roughly equivalent to "Castles in the Sky"). His first collection of short stories was published in Hebrew under the title* Sometimes It's Different *and as of this writing he has several works on the semifinal ballot for Israel's Gefen award. His* F&SF *debut is a clever twist on a familiar legend.*

Hunting a Unicorn

By Vered Tochterman

HUNTING A UNICORN IS NOT as easy as it sounds.

No, scratch that. It doesn't even sound easy. Only I didn't know that when the sorcerer Pranthar's apprentice came and asked me to get him a Unicorn's horn for a spell he was busy casting, in exchange for a respectable bag of gold pieces ("What do I care what you do with the rest? Steaks, if you feel like it," he said when I asked him about the rest of the carcass). So I agreed.

First of all, you need to find a girl in her virginal state. A maiden. Unicorns can be caught only using a virgin serving as bait. They will come to her, but not to anybody else. The beasts are like purity testers, without all the instruments. And I dare you to try and go around the village asking girls which of them is a virgin. Many slaps did I earn that way. And club threats. And one not particularly gentle encounter with a trough.

Eventually, Zera, the daughter of Mueny the miller, agreed to come along. She looks like your worst nightmare, so I felt certain she was a virgin.

We wandered the enchanted forest until we reached the Unicorn's

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lair. We located it by the holes in the tree trunks, which are typical of the way Unicorns sharpen their horns. Initially, the marks were far apart and old, and we knew that we were still far, but gradually they became nearer and fresher. We were approaching our target.

But as we drew near it, we began feeling odd feelings. First, Zera's eyes met mine. Then, her hand rubbed against my shoulder, as if by mistake. Then, my knee accidentally touched hers. I started sweating with no apparent reason, and Zera's breath hastened. And when we were at the very entrance to the Unicorn's lair....

Well, I won't go into details. I'll only add that if you intend to hunt a Unicorn, take into account that non-virgins cannot come near them. And that in spite of their gentle appearance, they do have natural defenses. Pheromones, the wizards call it. God damn these creatures, I wish they were all wiped out. Though I must admit, my wife Zera does not agree with me on that one.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

AS THE CALENDAR CHANGES and we proceed with our fifty-fifth year of publication, we have plenty of good fiction awaiting us. Next month's issue will include a new story by Nancy Etchemendy, "Nimitseahpah," which takes us to a frontier mining town where a young schoolteacher stands witness to unforgettable events.

Also scheduled for next month is a powerful new novelet by Michael Shea, "The Growlimb." This story is one of those rare tales that defies description but affects readers strongly. Don't miss it.

Our January issue will also feature Gregory Benford's latest column, in which he fills us in on his current work with solar sails, Robert Killheffer's book column on the subject of liberty, and plenty more good fiction and nonfiction.

In months ahead, we'll have new stories by Steven Utley, Robert Reed, Garth Nix, and a variety of newcomers. Give a friend a subscription and share the reading pleasure through the year.

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We opened this issue with a mention of a new anthology that merges the great detective Sherlock Holmes with the nightmarish cosmos imagined by H. P. Lovecraft. Just in case that happened to whet your appetite for matters Lovecraftian, we thought we'd end this issue with a surreal tale inspired in part by Mr. Lovecraft. And just in passing, your editor would like to thank that stolid denizen of Providence whose job it is to watch cemetery visitors in order to make sure no one vandalizes Mr. Lovecraft's grave or photographs it. Last July you did your job well, sir; long may "Providence 1 am" stand undisturbed.

Danny's Inferno

By Albert E. Cowdrey

"NOW, DANNY, DON'T YOU stink up the house while I'm gone," warned the love of my life, checking her ticket to Kansas City.

Edith's a checker by nature; she'd already checked six times to be sure she packed the sprightly paper on N-Dimensional Spaces with which she intended to astound fellow members of the North American Non-Euclidian Society.

I grunted noncommittally. I attribute much of the success of our marriage to mathematics. We wouldn't understand each other anyway and things like N-Dimensional Spaces give us a nice, objective reason not to do so. I write horror novels, she messes with fractals. Normally our universes are incommensurable, i.e., slide past one another without touching, and as a result our lives are blissful.

Well, maybe not *blissful*. We do disagree about certain things, including — but not limited to — garlic and Howard Phillips Lovecraft.

Consider garlic. My wife has trouble spreading mayo evenly on Wonder Bread, and I'm home all day anyway, so I do our cooking. Left to

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myself, I would flavor everything except chocolate mousse with the "stinking rose." Alas: Edith hates it. Since we occupy adjacent beds and from time to time become — as they say in divorce trials — intimate, the question is one upon which I feel she has a right to be heard.

Yet the perversity of this woman's taste detracts from my joy of life. How many excellent soups I've left unfinished, how many ragoux deficient, how many hamburgers lifeless, purely because her tongue can detect a single charmed quark of garlic among a trillion atoms of other flavors!

"Even the taste stinks," she says, wrinkling still further her small expressive marmoset face.

Then there's Lovecraft. To us devisers of awfulness, the sage of Providence, Rhode Island, was the model of a superlatively creepy writer. Hey, I make this declaration: Lovecraft is the garlic of the soul — the very flavor of bad dreams. His nights have a thousand eyes, all malignant. His stories are full of mad Arabs, faceless gods, sealed valleys by the Nile, Mountains of Madness. Can anyone fail to revel in such *richesse*?

Edith can. Once she read a single paragraph of "The Outsider" and pronounced H. P. "weird." Now, truthfully: Can you imagine a mathematician calling anything *weird*? Somebody who revels in an infinity of infinite numbers, no two of which are alike? Somebody who believes that a coffee cup and a doughnut are the same shape because each is a torus? Somebody whose favorite toy in childhood was a Möbius strip? Somebody who fills our windowsills with her collection of Klein bottles, three-dimensional shapes that have only one surface and — like mathematics itself — don't hold water?

Her attempt at literary criticism I judge to be ill-considered, unworthy, and irrelevant. I own every published work of H. P.'s, except for certain youthful effusions that my rare-book guy on Royal Street hasn't yet been able to track down. My library is my own, as hers is her own, and while she favors costly little tomes on topology printed in runs of sixteen copies on somebody's desktop, I like stories about Great Cthulhu, a being incredibly ancient, spectacularly tentacled, and homicidal almost to excess.

To hell with N-Dimensional Spaces. The spaces that count are those created by the seven senses — the five we acknowledge, plus imagination

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and memory, the senses by which we know things gone by and yet to come, and things that never will exist at all.

In Edith's absence, I intended to get absolutely stinking in every possible sense of the term. I figured I could air out the house (and myself) prior to her return.

Back home after dropping her off at Louis Armstrong International Airport, I began to plot a solitary evening. First I whipped up two or three pounds of hot redfish-pasta salad, flavored with my special pepper sauce and about half the garlic available in the ever-fragrant city of New Orleans. A search of the freezer turned up a pint of homemade port-currant sorbet for dessert. I had a liter and a half of a decent Australian Chardonnay from Dingotooth Vinyards to drink with the meal, and an incandescent inch or so of Remy Martin to sip afterward.

To serenade me while I ate and drank, I put an old Simon and Garfunkel tape — the one that makes me weep for my lost youth — on the stereo, and hit the button that causes it to repeat ad infinitum. Yea, verily: I am one of those now baggy-eyed and gut-burdened types who came of age early in the Glorious Sixties. Who sang folksongs to the strumming of acoustic guitars. Who got stoned and blown in unsanitary pads. Who brought a new incoherence to the already battered English language ("Like wow, man — it's like, groovy"). Who consumed LSD by the droplet and cannabis by the bale, all in search of some ultimate revelation. Who believed with the author of *Howl* that the best minds of our generation had been destroyed by an uncaring world, and who meant, by the best minds, us.

Come midnight I was a happy mess, stuffed full of great food, emitting scent like an archbishop's thurible, belching sonorously and drunk as a lord. As my eyes bleared, images of bygone friends and lovers rose before me. I visualized Lyla and Letitia, memorable blondes with whom I had the only three-person sex of my life, if you can call it three-person when you can't get an erection and have to lie there, a flaccid spectator, watching the girls make out with each other. I wept over this memory because never, never will I be able to make good that lost opportunity: today Lyla is born again and sings in a choir, while Letitia smokes panatellas and owns a Frenchmen Street bar called Rubyfruit.

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And I toasted the memory of Harry Higginbotham, now deceased but once my companion during many an adventure in the drug culture. Harry aspired to be a poet, but became too attached to nose candy for his own good. Needing money to support his habit, he decided to become a capitalist and died of cardiopulmonary arrest in the act of bidding for a Chicken Delight franchise. Now the poor bastard lies in Evermore Memorial Park on Airline Drive, a piece of overgrown grassland decorated with tiny bronze markers. A sports-hating atheist, he's spending eternity wedged in between a New Life temple and a minor-league baseball stadium.

How sad existence is! I brooded. *How pointless! How clumsy and absurd our long crawl from the cradle to the grave, or — to bring things up to date — from the incubator to the incinerator!*

Surely, I thought, H. P.'s mad faceless god Nyarlathotep broods over our destinies, causing an eagle to smash Euripides's head by dropping a turtle, making Tennessee Williams ingest a bottle cap and choke to death in his own bathroom. And my fate, what would it be? Probably to strangle on a torus in the shape of a glazed doughnut.

Feeling wonderfully sorry for myself, I dribbled the last drop of brandy onto the front of my best Junior League Thrift Shop shirt. "The Sounds of Silence" was playing for about the fortieth time as I staggered off to bed. Passing my bookcase, I snagged my favorite H. P. volume, a collection called *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* that August Derleth put together in the forties — way, way back when I was still a puling, mewling lump of protoplasm, unaware as yet of the dark enigma of Being in which I was about to find (and at the same time, lose) myself.

As I shed fragrant clothing, my thoughts — so far as I can remember them — were random: *Jus' read for a li'l while...horror comforts our dark moments...a few phosphorescent fungi may light the dark night of the soul....*

I did remember Edith, albeit briefly. Our wedding picture stands on the night table between our beds. When people are essentially funny-looking (as we are) why do they insist on having pictures made? I was in one of my fattest phases then, and Edith had scented but not removed her superfluous hair. The picture could well be titled "Lou Costello Weds a Lesser Primate."

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With malice I planted a garlic-scented kiss on Edith's image. I reached for the book — where the hell was it, anyway? — then crashed and passed — as H. P. would say — beyond the wall of sleep. And began to dream.

LIT BY A GLOOMY copper sky, a platoon of us were gathering on the edge of the Phosphorescent Jungle. We had to cross it on our way to the Mountains of Madness. Don't ask me how I knew all this; in a dream you just know things.

Old pals of mine mingled with people I'd only heard about. Dick Cheney was there, along with two former governors of Louisiana wearing striped suits that fit them very well. Harry was there, mysteriously attired in chicken feathers. Lyla was carrying a torus that may have had sexual significance. Edith must have walked out on the Non-Euclidians; she was holding, and gazing fixedly at, a large misshapen crystal — undoubtedly the Shining Trapezohedron that summons the Haunter of the Dark in H. P.'s story of the same name.

Then from the general direction of St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, Dominique You rolled up with a sailor's bowlegged gait and greeted me. This pirate (who commanded Andrew Jackson's cannon at the Battle of New Orleans) often turns up as my guide and alter ego in dreams. He is Mr. Wish Fulfillment, a daring guy who carries a cutlass and wears gold earrings and does all the things I'm afraid to do in real life.

"*Tiens! C'est vous?*" he greeted me. Dominique talks like Hercule Poirot, but worse.

"Ah, *mon vieux Dahnee,*" he continued, "but we have such a long way to go, *nom d'un nom*! Let us advance!"

"I have to go to the bathroom first."

He pointed to a doorway set rather strangely in a cypress tree. I was headed for it when I woke up, climbed out of bed, and stumbled into the bathroom. I switched on the light, squinting in the sudden blaze reflected from glazed green tiles.

I felt wavery and wobbly and strangely inflated, like the Hindenburg just before the fatal spark. Gazing into the vortex that followed the flush, I began to feel dizzy. Perhaps influenced by my hippie background, I thought of taking a pill — any pill. I reached for something, but my head

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was revolving on my neck. My last clear recollection was of a white glazed porcelain torus rushing straight up at me — and a blinding impact.

"Are you ready now to advance?" Dominique demanded.

"Look, *mon bon ami*, I'm afraid I passed out in the john and whacked my head on the toilet. I probably have a fatal concussion. I'm wearing nothing but my bare blubber and I'm lying on cold tiles. I'll get dehydrated and hypothermic. I'm probably bleeding to death at this very moment. My wife won't be home to find my shattered carcass for three days, and — "

"*Pousse-café*," he sneered. He pulled out his cutlass, an act which may have had sexual significance, and pointed the way. Awed by his power of command, we fell in obediently behind him and began trekking into deep shade lit only by chartreuse blobs of bioluminescence.

I found myself stumbling along beside Harry Higginbotham. "How are things on Airline Drive?" I asked.

"Pretty grim," he said. "There's a high water table and my coffin's starting to leak. How's Edith treating you?"

"We're deliriously happy."

"Like in 'The Thing on the Doorstep?'" he asked dryly, referring to one of H. P.'s most misogynistic stories. "Has she imprisoned your soul in her own liquifying corpse, leaving you unable to say anything except, 'Glub...glub'?"

"Not yet. For one thing, she isn't dead."

"Take it from me, Danny boy," said Harry, "you won't be able to say that forever."

"Why are you wearing those feathers?" I asked, to divert the conversation from myself.

"To remind me of that brief delirious moment when, coked to the gills, I raised my hand to bid on a Chicken Delight franchise and keeled over. If only I could've obtained it I might have become rich, and therefore happy."

"Recite me some of your poetry," I suggested, hoping to cheer him up. "How about that knockoff on *Howl* you did in 1964?"

I slowed my pace. Reciting loudly and gesticulating, Harry moved on ahead, totally unaware that now, as then, he had lost his audience.

Lyla joined me. "I keep looking for you in my Bible study class, Danny," she said. "But you never come."

"I still do, occasionally. But not in class."

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Frowning at this crude double-entendre, Lyla started power-walking and soon left me behind. Edith joined me, her eyes still fixed on the Shining Trapezohedron.

"I see," she intoned, "distant whorls of galaxies drifting randomly through dark infinities of horror."

"Well, stop staring at the goddamn crystal, then."

She squinted at me. "What is this place, anyway? Why are we here?"

I laughed at her discomfiture. "We're here because we're here. You, my love, have wandered into an unfolding tale produced by the tangled convolutions of my wine-sodden brain, as influenced by my garlic-swollen gut. This is the world of my subconscious, and it doesn't run by any formula known to mathematics, ha, ha!"

She looked around. The jungle had closed in; the path was becoming rough; lianas twisted from tree to tree. Strangler figs embraced forest giants. Unseen parrots shrieked. Glimpses of the sky still had a brazen hue, like a sunrise preceding storm.

None of these portents affected her in the least.

"I bet you didn't lift the seat before you peed," she said. "How many times have I talked to you about that? Topologically, a toilet seat is the same shape as a coffee cup — "

"Or a doughnut. It's a torus. Everything is a torus."

"Not if its genus is zero or more than one. How many times do I have to tell you that V - E + F = 2 - 2p?"

"That's it!" I thundered. "I didn't get soused so I could listen to dumb formulas that prove a hawk is really a handsaw. Go the hell back to Kansas City! Out! Scrammez-vous!"

Though not usually an obedient wife, she began to fade at once, muttering, "I better check and make sure the banquet committee has me down for the rubber chicken, white meat only."

As she vanished, the Shining Trapezohedron fell from her small hairy paws. I snatched it up and gazed deep into its mysterious depths.

She was wrong about the distant galaxies. What I saw was a file of ill-assorted people straggling through the Phosphorescent Jungle. One of them, a fat little guy with pink jowls, was holding a tiny crystal in whose faceted depths I could just make out a file of ill-assorted people straggling through the Phosphorescent Jungle.

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Suddenly horror gripped me. I looked up. Beyond the dark trees and the bronze sky I knew intuitively that something huge, formless, malefi-cent — something like an enormous quivering bloody-minded green aspic — was peering with a thousand golden eyes at a file of ill-assorted people straggling through the Phosphorescent Jungle.

Great Cthulhu!

"Dominique!" I shouted. "Wait for me!"

"These fantasies of infinite regression," he assured me as we stumped along together at the head of the column, "these notions of universes within universes, like a Chinese puzzle — these are fit only for mathema-ticians and fourteen-year-olds with terminal acne. For pirates and artists, reality has nothing to do with numbers. It is what we dream, what we imagine! There is no other!"

"So if you imagine a universe of horror, you live in a universe of horror."

"*Ça vous crève les yeux.*"

"Talk English."

"You betcha."

I stumbled along beside Dominique, feeling that something profound was about to be revealed. This bunch of ill-assorted people — this jungle lit only by phosphorescent fires that glowed and vanished — this trek to the Mountains of Madness under the brooding eye of Great Cthulhu — *wasn't this man's fate, as understood by H. P.??*

"Whoa!!" I said, stopping dead. "I'm going back. This isn't my dream. It's gotten infected with somebody else's fantasies — "

"*EN AVANT!!*" Dominique roared, waving his cutlass at me. That kind of French I understand.

For a time we paced together in silence. Then, as if regretting his sharpness with me, Dominique said, "So, Dahnee, you think you have a life apart from this place."

"Obviously. This is a dream."

"And yet not your dream."

The way he said it made me uneasy. "It certainly doesn't look like one of my dreams," I said cautiously. "Usually I dream about frustration. Like the time I was fishing with a bamboo pole — probably my dick — for a

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golden trout — probably Lyla — when an unseen sniper shot, and sank, my cork."

"Don't evade the issue."

"What is the issue?"

"The fact that what we are in may not be a dream at all."

"Bullshit! *Merde d'un boeuf!*" I added, in case his English was as bad as my French.

He gave me a look that I can only term compassionate. Have you ever been pitied by a two-hundred-year-old pirate? I became even more uneasy.

"Spit it out, Dominique!" I exclaimed.

"Perhaps you really did break your skull when you passed out *dans le pissoir*. Perhaps, like Tennessee Williams, you died in the smallest room of the house. Perhaps this existence is the only one you now enjoy, assuming that trekking for miles through the Phosphorescent Jungle toward the Mountains of Madness can be termed enjoyable."

"That's it! I'm waking up right now."

"How will you do that?"

For answer I snatched the cutlass away from him and slashed the palm of my left hand. It hurt like hell. I didn't wake up.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow," I mumbled, licking the wound. My blood tasted like garlic. Dominique took the cutlass back.

"I shall tell you how to know whether you're dead," he said.

"How?"

"The members of our safari who are not dead will disappear, one by one. Until you are left and I am left, and your *vieil ami*, the lousy poet, is left. All three of us are dead, and so — paradoxically — we are the ones who will remain to explore the dream world of someone else who is dead, M. Artifice de l'Amour."

"Don't call Lovecraft that. He'll think you think he wrote cowboy stories."

I looked back at the stragglers following us. Definitely, they were fewer than before. Where was Dick Cheney — gone again? Where were the two governors of Louisiana? Had their paroles been revoked?

Then, to my infinite relief, I spotted somebody I felt sure was alive. Letitia was stomping along in motorcycle boots and puffing on a cigar. "Letty!" I shouted. "Up here!"

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I made a face at Dominique. "Now we'll just see if everybody's dead," I sneered.

Letitia joined us, nodding in comradely fashion and tapping her cigar to get rid of the ash. "So, here's old Limp Biskit himself," she said, winking broadly.

"At least I didn't buy mine with extra batteries at Mr. Bojangles' Adult Goods Boutique," I snapped. "Look, Letty, answer me something. Are you dead?"

A troubled look crossed her broad face. "I'm not sure," she said, a tremor of doubt in her usually decisive voice. "I've got a sweetie in Houston and I was headed west on I-10 with my Harley. I was on crystal meth and I have the strangest feeling that something awful may have happened the other side of Krotz Springs. But I don't remember what.... How about you? You still married to the tarsier?"

"Now wait a minute."

"I don't mind munching a rug, but let's face it, Sweetheart, Edith is all rug."

That was her mistake. Just because I insult my wife more or less constantly, at least in my thoughts, was no reason to let the dream image of a fat dyke do it. Suddenly I snatched away Dominique's cutlass and ran it to the hilt right between Letty's enormous boobosities.

"Well, at least that's hard," she said.

Obviously, the damned woman was already dead, and killing her was an exercise in frustration. I raised my hands to heaven, and in a roar that resounded through the Phosphorescent Jungle, I shouted, "GREAT CTHULHU! IN THE NAME OF THY CREATOR, H. P. LOVECRAFT, REMOVE THIS *BOULE DE SUIF* FROM AMONGST US!!"

At once the tangle of branches overhead parted with a great rush and creaking. What may have been either a head or a thick tentacle descended — it had no nose or mouth, but it was equipped with multiple glowing yellow spots that I took to be eyes — and went *shloop*. Letty vanished, save that for an instant a struggling fat shadow could be seen within the drippy gloppy translucent gelatinous horror of Great Cthulhu.

"Thanks, big guy," I told him as he withdrew into the firmament. "I owe you one."

"You didn't have to lose my cutlass — " Dominique was beginning,

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when from far above came a giant primordial belch. The cutlass whistled down through the branches and smacked into the soft earth between us.

With dawning respect, Dominique asked, "How did you get him to do that?"

"It just came to me," I declared. "I'm an artist. I'm in contact with mysterious sources of energy."

"*Ah, ça, c'est magnifique!*" he enthused. "In death, you have become a man!"

"I'm not dead. You're not dead either, because you aren't a two-hundred-year-old pirate, you're my alter ego in my dreams."

"You just said this isn't your dream."

He had me there. But I wasn't about to yield the advantage I'd gained by dispatching Letty. I snatched up the sword and raised it high in the air.

"*EN AVANT!*" I roared, and onward we lurched, Dominique following me and Higginbotham following him, still reciting terrible poetry.

One thing remained to bother me — like Edith and Dick Cheney and the governors, Lyla had disappeared. And she, I knew for certain, was still alive.

THE JUNGLE, LIKE a green foaming sea, broke tumultuously against towering stony ramparts.

Jeez, I can't keep on writing like that. We reached the Mountains of Madness, or at any rate *a* mountain. As mountains tend to do, it occupied the skyline, its crest hidden by subordinate bulges of rock and immense draperies of dark green vines in which little yellow birds were flickering and fluttering.

"Wow, what a nice place for a vacation," I remarked.

"I doubt it," said Dominique. "Somewhere in this mountain, deep in a cavern, sits the mad faceless god Nyarlathotep with his private boy-band of amorphous idiot flute players."

"We're in that story now?"

"*Ça vous crève les yeux.*"

"Oh, shut up."

Harry Higginbotham had fallen far behind, but now he came puffing up and joined us. "Boy," he gasped, "being dead really shortens your stride."

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"You need to get out more, Harry."

"I think," said Dominique, making use of his practical pirate brain, "that we can climb upward via that crevice."

Yes, there was a crack in the mountain, with a deeper crack visible inside it, the whole overgrown by tangles of vine. (Take that, Dr. Freud!) We mounted — I'm not doing this deliberately — we mounted slowly through the cracks, or crevices, taking turns hacking away the vines with Dominique's cutlass. The work was hard but strangely satisfying, and in time we emerged gasping for breath upon a broad shelf of rock littered with scree, facing the mouth of a cavern from which faint sounds of revelry emerged.

"*Le but!*" he exclaimed. "The goal! The end is in sight!"

"The end of what?" I asked uneasily.

Clearly, we were approaching some sort of revelation, and I wasn't at all sure that I wanted whatever it was revealed to me. I mean, suppose the revelation was that we were, in fact, all dead? Suppose we all wound up on Airline Drive under little bronze markers, next to the New Life temple?

"See you guys later," I said, turning to go.

Oh Lord, I should have known. In the distance, flickering bronze stormclouds had devoured the horizon. Amid them hovered Great Cthulhu, waving menacing tentacles in the shape of forked lightning, obviously ready to send me where Letty had gone, wherever that might be.

"On second thought, *en avant*," I muttered despairingly, and led my buddies into the cavern.

Goddamn garlic anyhow. The noble veg that enlivens food, thins the blood, fights cancer, and repels vampires also gives me nightmares. I accept that fact; I am prepared to pay that price for the joy of eating the divine and stinking rose. I am not a kid anymore, I know that life leads to death and love to loss, that's just the way it is. I know that joy without pain is like the square root of minus one, an imaginary number.

But why do my nightmares have to be so *uncomfortable*? And why, on this occasion, did the dreamworld of H. P. Lovecraft have to get mixed up with my own sufficiently appalling images?

Listen — that cavern was absolute hell. The way was twisty and turny, stalactited and stalagmited, rough and rocky yet covered with a thin, greasy scum of clay in which we slipped and slid. I blundered into icy

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pools full of little pale shrimp and blind white golliwogs. Enormous cockroaches slithered hither and thither, feeding on bat dung. One that had been exploring a stalactite fell down the back of my shirt and scrambled out again with spiky legs, giving me a sudden and violent case of the willies.

Without the bioluminescence, now provided by little worms hanging from filaments of mucous, I couldn't have seen a thing and would have fallen on my butt even more frequently than I did, which was about every five steps. And the rock was *hard*, you know?

To complete our discomfort, a distant racket of toots and tweedles was growing louder. I won't say the noise was as bad as hip-hop, but it was pretty bad anyway. It sounded like a thousand eight-year-olds learning the ocarina; like the complete works of Arnold Schönberg played backward by a jug band; like the music of the spheres in a universe gone mad. It sounded more and more like...the world of H. P. Lovecraft.

What had I gotten myself into?

Oh God, Edith, I thought, come home! Quit nattering about Fermat's Last Theorem! Abandon the fleshpots of K. C., the sensual delight of listening to papers on number theory, the crackling repartee of pimply youths and bloated elders who smell like homeless shelters and devote their lives to discovering Analytical Truth!

Come back and, ere it is too late, find me on the bathroom floor. Lift me up tenderly, revive me, get me moving again. If you do, I'll fix you one of your favorite tasteless meals. How about a soyburger and a nice marshmallow salad? How about a glass of cranapple juice?

Suddenly I realized that there are many worse things in this world than living with somebody who is fundamentally alien and incomprehensible and boring. Had Edith realized that years ago? Was that why she put up with an ill-natured arrogant shit like me?

So much for the revelation *du jour*. Now, I wondered: How do I get out of this nightmare anyway?

All this silent rhetoric got me exactly nowhere, except deeper into the mountain.

Our way was ever downward, and evermore we slipped and slid and occasionally sat down hard in the goopy gloppy clay. Louder and louder

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shrilled the flutes or fifes or piccolos, accompanied now by what sounded like Beethoven's last string quartet — the extremely noisy one — played on musical saws. Little by little, a greenish light began to reflect on the cavern walls, the glowworms faded out and the roaches skittered back into the darkness where I, for one, would have liked to follow them.

We emerged onto a stone outcropping forming a natural balcony that overlooked a vast space, roundish and sloping inward toward the bottom, where a huge white object was sitting. *Oh Christ, it was Nyarlathotep!*

The god looked more than anything else like the Michelin Man, a mountainous heap of smooth white curves rising up to a spherical head with no face. The light that filled his inferno poured out of a cloudy greenish halo like a quasar spinning rapidly above him. The ghastly music rose from a myriad of albino treefrogs that clung to the walls with the suckers on their feet, inflating white balloons of throats and peeping and fweeping and tweedling and tootling away *fortissimo*. White insects like the ghosts of katydids provided the stridulation, and from time to time a frog would gulp one down and then resume its song with added strength and discordancy.

"Wow, isn't it cool?" Harry remarked, peering over my shoulder.

"Exactly why is this place of obscene senseless revolting horror 'cool'?" I asked with some asperity.

"It's, like, hell for the up-to-date. The big boy there in the middle is Satan — or, if you prefer, God — for Our Times. He's so smooth because there's nothing to grab hold of. He's got no face, so you can't read his expression. He's got no mouth, so he can't tell you anything. There's no way to make sense of him."

"How do you know all this stuff about him?" I demanded. "Is he a relative of yours?"

"I know," Harry explained, "because I saw him once before, in 1967 after I dropped some acid. You were supposed to be my groundman that night, only you got zonked and forgot to bring the chlorpromazine tranquilizers, so I took a bad trip. See, he's all white because white is the noncolor that combines all colors. He's as white as that other ponderous literary symbol of the Mystery of Things, Moby Dick — "

"Is that what *Moby-Dick*'s about? I never could get past 'Call me Ishmael.'"

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"I should've had a copy buried with me. It's one of those books you can spend eternity reading."

"*Nom d'un nom d'un nom!*" exclaimed Dominique, who had been listening to this exchange with growing impatience. "*Quel enfantillage!* Can we return to our muttons? The question is: How do we get out of this hell for overage hippies? Eh? Eh??"

"The pirate has a point," said Harry. "I'd kind of like to get back to my coffin. It ain't much and the neighborhood stinks, but it's home. Anyway, I'm tired. It's funny how easily you get fatigued when you're dead."

I too wanted to get back, back to Edith if that was possible. Never had I longed so much for the touch of her tiny raccoon hands. But getting back meant I had to think. *Think!* Edith...Edith...help me! I prayed. Your mind's incomprehensible, mathematics is incomprehensible, Nyarlathotep is incomprehensible, the universe is incomprehensible — surely that ought to provide some common ground!?

And then it came to me.

"You know," I said slowly, "I just realized that Nyarlathotep is a bunch of toruses. Or tori, or whatever. I mean, all parts of him are generated by the revolution of closed curves around a central axis, right? And so's his halo. His body and his halo look different, but topologically they're exactly the same."

"So what?" asked Harry.

"Well, if that's true, then he ain't no mystery after all, because he can be solved by the equation V - E + F = 2 - 2p."

"I think you have to say it louder," suggested Harry.

"*Tout à la fois!*" roared Dominique. "All together!!"

"V - E + F = 2 - 2p!!!" we thundered.

"*ENCORE!*" shouted Dominique, in the voice he'd probably used when ordering his cannon to knock hell out of the British redcoats on January 8, 1815, at the battle of New Orleans.

"V - E + F = 2 - 2p!!!"

At that Nyarlathotep began to come apart. His halo went first, whirling faster, rising like a helicopter and at the same time dispersing. Then his huge body melted into a single beam of intense white light, so intense that I was blinded for a moment as if by a supernova. The beam shot upward and the mountain dissolved, forming an open crater whose

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sides swiftly shrank and crumbled and declined around us, until we were standing on level ground.

Great Cthulhu had vanished with his god. In place of the Phosphorescent Jungle, a broad field of green grass spread to infinite horizons. Over the waving stems, golden dragonflies were flying and lighting. Everywhere were colors, yellow sunlight, blue sky, a myriad of tiny rainbows refracting through insect wings and raindrops left by dispersing stormclouds. The whiteness had shattered into its components, and the world was more complicated and more brilliant and more beautiful than any Persian carpet ever woven by the hand of man.

Clearly we had been saved and redeemed, but why and for what? Whoa, I thought: stop right there! You ought to know by now where asking questions like that will get you. Where you've just come from — right down in the asshole of the universe.

Happily Dominique wrapped me in a Gallic embrace. "*Adieu, mon vieil ami,* until your next dream!" he exclaimed, and vanished in the general direction of St. Louis Cemetery No. 1.

Harry shook hands formally. "I sure hope you're not dead," he said in a choked-up voice. "If you're not, come visit me sometime, okay? It really gets lonesome out there on Airline, nobody around but minor-league ballplayers and born-agains."

"I promise," I said, but I think he caught a note of insincerity in my voice, because he tried to sweeten the invitation.

"Lyla sings in the choir at New Life," he said, "in case you're interested. I think she might like you again if you'd just stop bad-mouthing women."

Rather forlornly, he waved his hand and faded out. Light was shining through him, bringing renewed pain to my eyes, which now fluttered open.

I was lying on the floor of the bathroom, with glare reflecting off the walls of green glazed tiles. My head was pulsating like a bag of live bait. Before passing out I must have reached for a glass to wash down some pills, because my left hand was stuck full of glittering shards and bleeding lavishly. *The Sound of Silence* was playing yet again, and I wondered briefly if Art Garfunkel's falsetto might have evoked the shrill music of my dream.

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* * *

Icebag on head, I'm lying in bed, propped up on pillows. My hand is wrapped in gauze. On the bedside table by my marriage picture rests a large chip of white porcelain my head knocked off the edge of the toilet when I passed out.

I figure it's better to have my head crack the john than the other way around. But I know damn well I'd better get the damage repaired before Edith comes home, unless I want to spend the rest of my life listening to the words, "I always knew your head was like a rock, but — "

In any case, there's no question of going back to sleep at the moment. I've turned off the stereo and swallowed a couple of hydrocodones for the pain, but the knot on my skull is still throbbing. Better let my guts settle down, I figure, let the remaining garlic volatilize and escape through its natural vent, let the wine turn into ketones or whatever it turns into and exhale gently through my pores.

Let the painkiller work. Try to recover a bit, I advise myself, before venturing once more into H. P.'s country beyond the wall of sleep. Speaking of that...I reach for the volume of the old master's creepy stories, open the dry, spotted, crackly pages, focus my eyes with extreme difficulty and begin to read.

I have often wondered, writes the sage, *if the majority of mankind ever pause to reflect upon the titanic significance of dreams....*

I'm feeling better already, thinking: Like wow, man — it's like, groovy. ☙

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The protagonist, Edward Venn-Thomas, is "invoked" into this society by a group of witches, and of course falls in love with one of them. Some fairly standard plot complications follow, with decidedly nonstandard consequences. Along the way, we are treated to some lovely inventions: the Nonsense House, brutches, ghosts-but-not-really, ritual death and rebirth. In Chapter Sixteen, Venn-Thomas has a satisfying, and often funny, philosophical conversation with a would-be poet named Quant (probably Graves's stand-in). And I guarantee you will jump out of your chair at the end of Chapter Twenty-one.

The poignant and evocative ending, when Venn-Thomas returns to his wife with an unusual gift, is well worth the journey. ⚜

—J. M. Graetz

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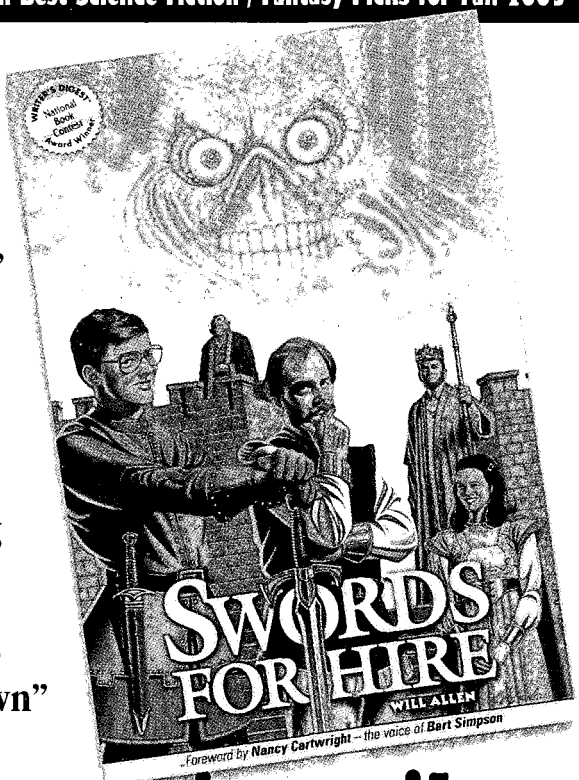
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